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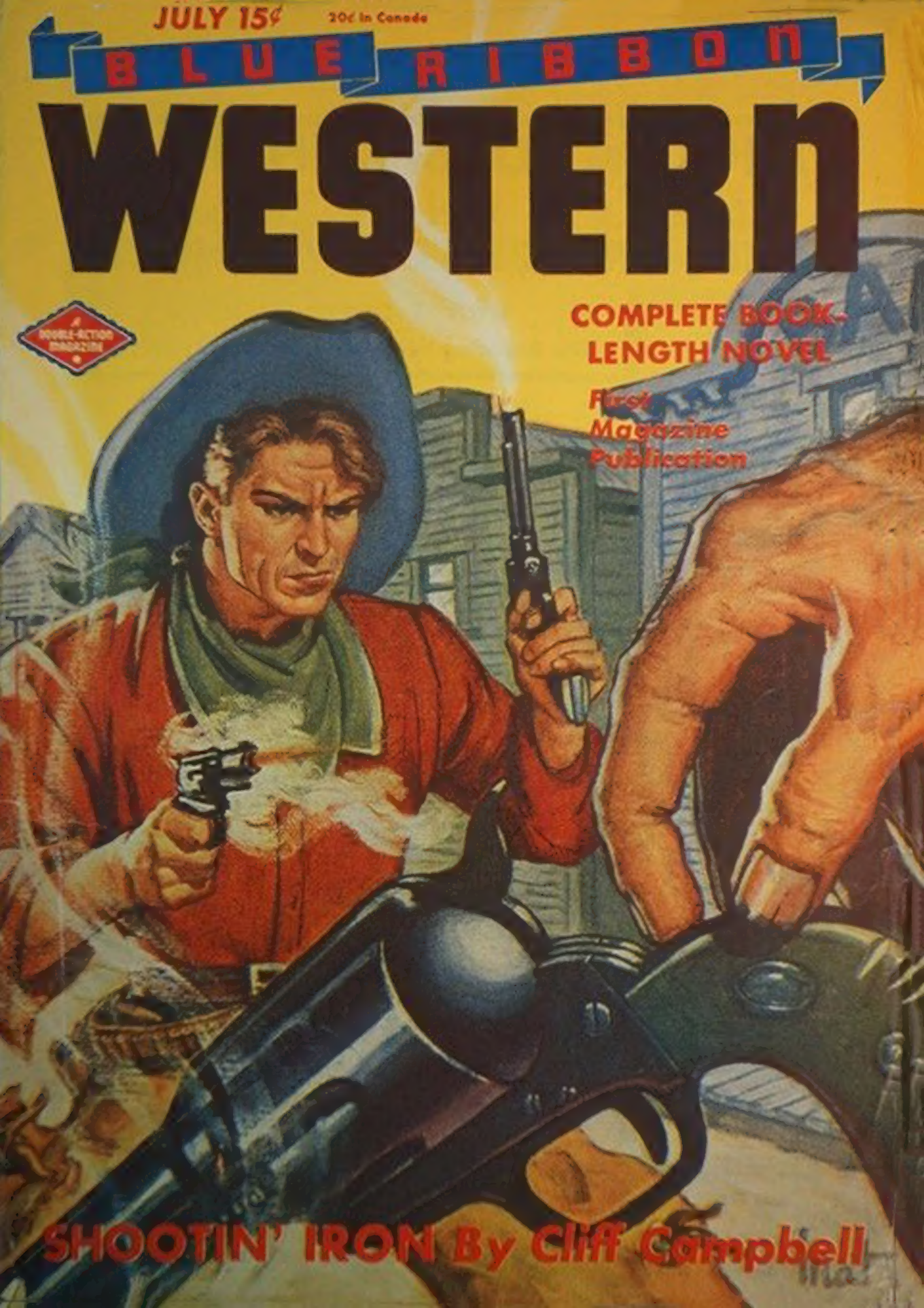

SHOOTIN' IRON By Cliff Campbell

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Volume 8 ★ Ju ★ Number 2

ACTION-PACKED BOO EN' TH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publica tion)

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Jeff Boone had a trouble-shooting job on his hands, but more than that, he had lovely Nora McQuade. Which wouldn't have been any burden except for one thing: Jeff had to see that the railroad spur got through in time, and the man Nora loved was out to see that it didn't!

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n doe t have to be yellow to be sick of guns and powdersmoke!

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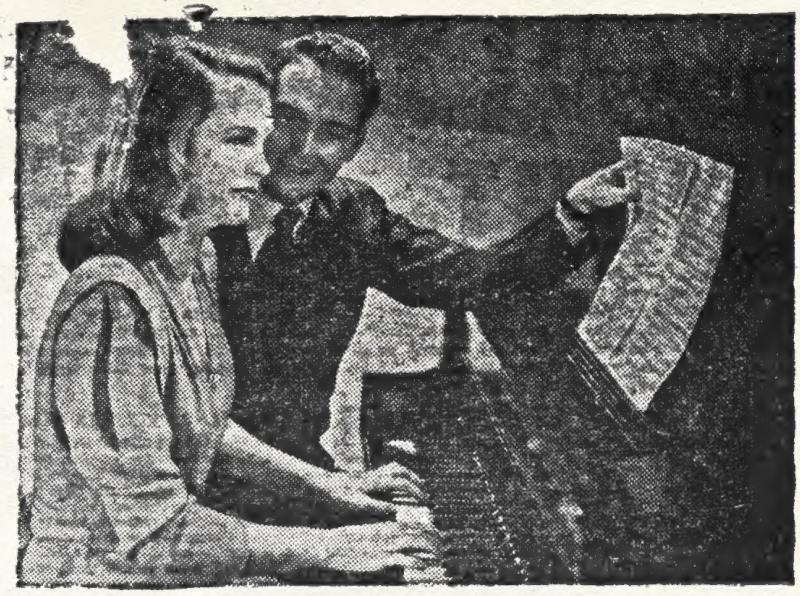

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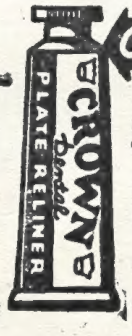

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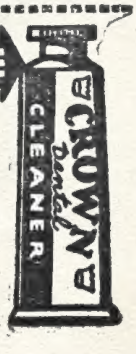

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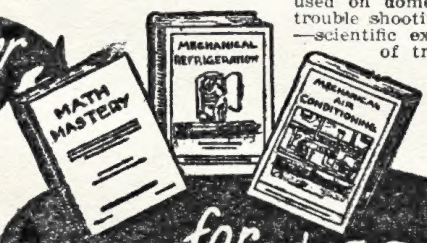

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SHOOTIN' IRON

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By Cliff Campbell

Complete, Action-Packed Book-Length Novel

Jeff Boone had a job to do, to see that the railroad got through in time. But if he exposed the identity of the traitor in the outfit, it would break Nora McQuade's heart!

CHAPTER I

Trouble-Shooter

THE PRAIRIE had about run its course here. To the east and south it spread, weary mile on mile, but to the north and west were foothills. And, farther to the

"Landslide! Get under cover!" yelled Jeff as he seized Nora.

north were the Wyoming Rockies themselves.

Jeff Boone pulled his horse to a stop, the six-feet-two of him flowing easy in the saddle, his deep blue eyes fixed on the far blue of those giant hills.

"That's God's country up there, Garth," he said simply.

His companion, short, stocky, dressed in shiny boots and close-fitting breeches, and obviously not so used to the saddle, shrugged and gave a short barking laugh.

"God's country, eh?" he retorted. "Maybe it was intended as such, Jeff—but it's called Hellgate now. And it's a darned sight easier to lay track on level prairie than through such hells as those—or ought to be, by every law of reason."

Jeff allowed his gaze to rove to that far scar of railroad grade again.

"Ought to be, but isn't?" he suggested.

Garth Hamby shrugged.

"Oh, it is, so far as the actual laying of track goes. The trouble is, ouw whole job has bogged down like a cow in a marsh. That's what I sent for you for, what I want to talk to you about—building the railroad."

JEFF SURVEYED his companion with amused surprise.

"I knew you had somethin' buzzin' in your head when I got that message, Garth. You always do get ideas. Never knew you to do a thing without a reason, either. But seems to me you're on the wrong track this time. I don't know a thing about railroads, much less the building of 'em."

"I know al' 'hat." Garth Hamby waved an impatient fist. "Which may have its advantages. I know that you have a way of getting things done—always did have, and still do. And when I got to casting around in my mind for a trouble-shooter who could shoot trouble—and kill it—I thought of you. That's why I sent you that wire, why we're here.

"Now I'll talk turkey. You know that we're building a railroad, Jeff—or trying to. Running a spur six hundred miles north, through those hills."

"I've heard some talk of such," Jeff conceded. "I kind of thought the line would be farther along than it is, by now."

"It should be," Garth barked. "It ought to be. Two hundreds miles of prairie at the start, and we should have track laid a half of the total distance by now. As a matter of fact, we've only gone a quarter—a hundred and fifty miles or so, along the easiest going of the whole way. And right now we're bogged down and not traveling at all."

He paused to snort again.

"I used to think raising cattle was tough, with rustlers, hard winters, blackleg and all the rest of it, but I didn't know what trouble was. We're under contract to run up into Montana and hook on to the main line up there. Opening up a rich timber and mining country, to say nothing of cattle, and grain, which is coming. It looked like a grand opportunity, a few months back, and the board of directors jumped at the chance. And now they're that skittish they jump if you drop a pin."

"How come?"

"Interests back in here wanted the spur—wanted it bad. They offered us some fine inducements to build, which made it sound so nice. So we started, with a time-limit clause. Which was all right, too, and only good business. But the way things are going now, or failing to go, we'll not only be caught short when the time's up, but we'll be bankrupt as well, and lose everything we've put into it." His jaw set a little harder—the old fighting jaw which Jeff remembered.

"That would wipe me out, Jeff," he added quietly. "Along with a lot of better men. I could take it, even if I'm not as young as I once was. But there's my family to think about—and I'm darned if I think much of getting licked on a job like this, anyway."

"You never did take kindly to such, as I recall. Must be somebody stands to profit if you lose?"

"NATURALLY. If there's deviltry, you'll find a devil behind the scenes. When the Northern signed up to build this line, there didn't seem to be anybody else who was interested. But we found out later that there was; they were just keeping in the background. It's a big syndicate of unscrupulous hogs who call themselves business men. I've found out that much, though there's plenty about them that I still don't know — nor who is doing the dirty work for them. But I know how they aim to work it now."

"I'm still listenin'."

"Their idea has been to let us go ahead, and build as much line as we could, just so that two things happen —that we're caught short and forfeit the right of way, and so that we can go bankrupt on the job. That way, they can easy manipulate things to get a new contract themselves. As a matter of fact, I guess they have it already, signed and ready to take effect when we fail. Then they take over what we've done, for a song, and pick all the plums—at our expense. Besides figuring to get control of our main line at the same time."

"Sounds mean enough."

"Mean's a mild word. The devil of it is that we're in this and we can't quit now. There's trouble, open and secret, all the time, which costs us plenty and is slowing construction down to practically nothing. Unless we have tracks finished to the other side of the mountains, through the Hellgate, and that's a hundred miles past where we are now, in three months from today, we forfeit right there."

"I'm a bit surprised at you signing such a contract, Garth."

"Think I'm slipping, eh? Well, Jeff, I didn't sign it—my board of directors pulled that one while I was sick, and of course I was bound by it. The other side slipped that clause in. Even the other side of Hellgate is still a long way short of being done. And that Hellgate country is the bad stretch of the whole route. The way things have been going, it'd take us three years instead of three months."

"Sounds bad." Jeff whistled between his teeth. "And you don't know just who you are fighting—the real scrap?"

"No. There's spies in our ranks. I want you to take charge as trouble - shooter. You will be superintendent of construction, so far as a title goes, and I expect you to get results, to get the road built. How you do it is your own business — but I'm depending on you, Jeff. You can ride over to Lumpjaw, which is end of steel at present, in an hour—and go to work."

FOR A LONG moment Jeff gazed off toward those mighty hills ahead.

"Reckon things at the ranch can get along without me," he agreed. "Whether I can do this sort of a job or not, I don't know. If it wasn't for you, Garth, I wouldn't even think of tryin'."

Garth Hamby's stern, rather tired face relaxed a little. He leaned across and extended his hand in a hard grip.

"Thanks, Jeff. I knew you wouldn't let me down." He drew a thick sealed envelope from his pocket, passed it over.

"Here are your credentials—if you need 'em. As to what you do, the sky's the limit, just so you get results. I've got to get back to headquarters and hold down that end of it. You ride along and knock a few heads together."

He nodded briefly, whirled his horse and was away toward the south in a cloud of dust. Jefferson Davis Boone watched him go.

"Same old Garth," he murmured.

"Being a railroad president, you'd expect him to come to end of steel in a private car. But not Garth Hamby—not with a chance like that to get a horse between his knees again. And maybe he wanted to do it kind of secret."

Jeff headed his own horse toward the line of railroad grade. Off there was the town of Lumpjaw, and Garth had said that Lumpjaw was the end of steel.

Lumpjaw was a town which, erroneously, liked to think of itself as a metropolis of the prairie. It had had a running start in that direction with nine saloons, and that in its heyday as a cattle town. With the coming of the railroad, the nine had been increased by seven, and even its riotous days of the past were mild compared to its present turbulence.

The construction crew, Jeff noted, had run steel into town, then had done some half-hearted work at grading for a few miles beyond. But beyond tearing up the monotonous landscape a bit, they appeared to have quit for the day, even though it still lacked an hour of noon. The right of way looked as peaceful as a camp meeting and almost as deserted as a ghost town.

JEFF'S route was bringing him up to the railroad at some distance from the edge of town, along the completed track. He swung his horse around a little butte, and the track was ahead, as was also a locomotive puffing along with a couple of cars behind it.

At sight of this strange snorting steel cayuse, his own bronc went into a fit of bucking. Jeff calmed it down, but the train pulled to a stop to watch the show. Jeff promptly swung from the saddle, dropping the reins, and stepped up into the engine.

"Nothing like making a thing work both ways," he said, grinning amiably. "You've seen how I handle that cayuse, so now show me how you start and stop this horse of yours."

Dinny McQuade, attired in greasy blue overalls and a ferocious spread of mustache, bristled at this invasion of his own private precincts. Though half a head shorter than Jeff, he fronted up to him like a bantam rooster.

"Get offa me engine and stay offa it, buckaroo," he retorted instantly. "Who do yez think ye arre, annyway, to be intrudin' on railroad property?"

"I'm Jeff Boone, the new troubleshooter for this railroad," Jeff explained, peering over the engineer's shoulder. "And now show me how to start and stop this thing."

"And I'm a little bird twitterin' in a tree," McQuade retorted fiercely. "Get off, I said."

He reached, jerking the throttle open suddenly, with an unkind hope that the action would catch Jeff off balance and jerk him off the train. McQuade smothered a grin as the wheels ground into motion, then he felt the last vestige of it vanish as he was caught by the collar and the slack of his overalls, raised in a pair of ham-like hands, and held, kicking and impotent, out over the track slipping past below, as effortlessly as if he had been a baby.

"When you get ready to do as I tell you," Jeff said patiently, "just say so."

"Casey," McQuade squalled. "Casey, ye big over-growed lout, what the divil are yez doing, standin' there and doing nothin'? Get busy."

Out of the corner of his eye, while holding the squirming engineer, Jeff noted that the fireman, who was nearly as big as Jeff himself, with arms like those of a blacksmith, had grabbed up a long bar which he

used for poking the fire, and now he lunged forward, lifting the bar. Jeff kicked straight back with one leg, like a sleepy mule, catching the surprised Casey in the midriff and sending him completely off the train.

"Hey, lemme up, quick," McQuade gasped, as he squirmed and contorted enough to see what had happened. "We'll run plumb off the end of track if we don't get stopped."

'Sure," Jeff said. He sat him down, and the little engineer made a dive for his levers. Breathing hard, he brought the train to a stop.

"Thanks," Jeff said, watching with interest. "I guess I savvy how it's done now."

"Are yez trouble-shooter here?" McQuade inquired respectfully, as he turned to look up at the towering cowboy. "Sure, and I was in a position to be doubtin' your word — yez didn't look the part, but yez do act it, if I do say—"

But before he could say it, there was an unlooked-for interruption. A girl of eighteen or so, with hair as black as the off-side of midnight and eyes to match, and cheeks which flamed to rival the open firebox, came climbing down over the tender. Her eyes were fixed on Jeff, and as she reached him, she brought the flat of her hand against Jeff's cheek with a report like a pistol shot.

CHAPTER II

Six-Gun Argument

SHE WASN'T big—just a good handful—but the look on her face made up for that. As her hand came away from Jeff's cheek, her tongue went into action.

"What do you mean, you big bully, by treating my dad the way you just did?" she demanded, eyes flashing, and standing on tiptoe to glare into his eyes. "Who do you think you are, anyway, interfering around a railroad?"

Jeff was speechless. He had dreamed, now and then, of such a girl, but the chances of meeting her had seemed remote, especially under such conditions and in such a place.

He could only gaze back at her with increasing admiration. Then, as she paused to catch her breath, he spoke out of the side of his mouth to McQuade.

"I take back what I was thinking about you. If you are her dad, there must be something good about you, after all."

McQuade glared, then, seeing the look on his daughter's face, he smiled suddenly.

"Sure, and maybe we was both mistook some. Misther Boone, this is me daughter Nora, who sometimes has a forceful way about her, indade even a striking one. Nora, this is Jeff Boone, who says he's the new trouble-shooter for the railroad."

"Trouble-shooter, is it?" Nora demanded, not drawing back at all. "And do you have to start in on the best man on the railroad, then?"

"Sure, and 'twas a matter of a small misunderstandin' on me own part as to his credentials, Nora darlin'," McQuade interposed. "Now that that's cleared up, there'll be no more."

"And that's correct, Nora darlin'," Jeff nodded solemnly. "You see—"

"Nora is my name," she flashed at him. "Nora McQuade, if so be as it holds any interest for you."

"It is a right pretty name, and fits

you near as well as the other," Jeff admitted, and she stared at him with a shade of wonderment for a moment, then turned quickly to look as Casey Ryan came limping up and clambered aboard again.

"Sure, Casey, and from the looks of it, they've sent a trouble-shooter here at last as is a man," she nodded.

Casey paused to rub two or three sections of his anatomy experimentally, shaking his head as he eyed Jeff.

"If he can clane up on the devils as is hinderin' the railroad as well as he did on the crew that's runnin' it, he'll do wonders," he agreed. "But if that divil of a LeGrande shoots him, 'twill not be mesilf as sits among the mourners."

Jeff, with a wave, had swung down from the cab and started for the town. Nora jerked her eyes away from his broad back for a moment.

"Take shame to yourself for such thoughts, Casey," she flashed at him. "If that LeGrande kills him, I—I'll kill LeGrande." And leaving Casey staring after her in slow perplexity, she turned and ran for the caboose.

DINNY McQuade pulled at his mustache, then hurried to follow Jeff. There was something unorthodox about this man, and he had shown no credentials to back up his statement that he was the new trouble-shooter. But somehow Casey believe him, and so did Dinny McQuade. Joining up with Jeff, he found himself answering questions, and noted that they were very much to the point.

The railroad had been planned to run right through the middle of the town, and steel had been laid to the center of Lumpjaw, with a quarter-mile or so of side-track paralleling it at the end. Most of the scanty rolling stock and equipment seemed to be on this side-track. Jeff looked it over briefly, paused to stare at the end of steel. It was blocked by an old frame building, setting squarely across the track.

"What's the big idea of that?" Jeff demanded. "Some new wrinkle in railroading?"

"That's LeGrande's idea," McQuade said bitterly. "LeGrande, ye'll understand, is a gambler and saloon-keeper, who makes it his business to travel right along at end of steel, and he heads up all the diviltry to keep the rails from being laid. He gets one of the prominent citizens of this town to start movin' that ould shed, and he gets it onto the tracks and claims it's stuck. The local law, headed by the town marshal, who's too crooked to lie straight, tells us we can't touch it. Always there's something to delay the railroad."

"In that case, why not shoot LeGrande and be done with it?"

McQuade stared. Jeff seemed to be serious about it. The little engineer shook his head, though his walrus mustache trembled fiercely.

"A foine idea, bucko, but not so aisy to do. Like I said, LeGrande controls the local law, such as it is, and he has a crew of gunmen, as well as plenty roustabouts. Does anny-one interfere—like the last four or foive trouble-shooters they've sint out here—sure and there becomes a vacancy to be filled, as well as a new grave on the lone prairie."

"Is that the way of it, now?" Jeff asked softly. "I'd like to meet this LeGrande."

"I'll show him to ye, if so," McQuade agreed. "Though I'm regretful that we have to have such a short acquaintance, and so will Nora be. I think she liked you."

"Do you now?" Jeff stopped to stare at him, rubbing his chin. "She didn't appear to—but I'll keep that in mind."

MCQUADE gave him a queer glance, stopped before a saloon whose sign emblazoned it as being The Rum Bottle. He glanced in through the open door, nodded.

"He's inside. And over to the right, at that table, is Red Chilton, his bodyguard and chief gunman—who's the quickest man on the draw, they say, in sivinteen states, and has proved it whiniver necessary, addin' to the population of Boothill at the last three-four towns at end of steel.

He wears his hair slicked down and that little mustache, ye'll see, and he's as greasy a divil as he looks. LeGrande is that tall hombre who looks like a gintleman—but ain't."

LeGrande, Jeff saw, had yellow hair and eyes as gray and cold as steel beneath it, and he wore the typical frock coat and black suit of a gambler. And already, though not appearing to do so, he was watching them covertly as they approached his table. Jeff wasted no words.

"I understand that you've been causing a lot of trouble around here, hindering the railroad, LeGrande," he said, leaning his knuckles on the table and smiling at LeGrande with a flash of white teeth. "So I'm giving you an hour to get out of town, and after that, if I ever see you around this country again, it'll be open season for lobos."

There was the shadow of a sneering smile on LeGrande's face but it faded now before this blunt challenge. In all his experience, this was a more abrupt declaration of war than he had been used to.

But he was not a gambler for nothing; almost at once his muscles were under control again, and he sat back in his chair, hooking his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, conveniently near to his twin-holstered guns, smiling back into Jeff's face.

"Well, well, isn't this a bit abrupt? I don't believe I have the pleasure of your acquaintance, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Boone is the name—Jeff Boone." Jeff's own smile broadened. "And I doubt if it'll be any pleasure. I'm trouble-shooter for the railroad, and I don't say the same things twice, LeGrande."

"Trouble-shooter, eh, Mr. Boone?" LeGrande's voice was smooth. "In that case, and purely as a friendly gesture, allow me to say that that is exactly what the spur has been needing. Also, might I suggest that, in taking your present course, you are—er—perhaps biting off rather a big chunk of trouble?"

"I always figure to chew what I bite on," Jeff drawled. "Don't forget, you have fifty-eight minutes left."

Casually, he turned his back squarely on LeGrande and started for the door, McQuade beside him. The crowded room had grown suddenly silent, tense, as men watched, although there was a hasty scrape of chairs as a few of the more timid hurried to be elsewhere. Except for them, no one had moved.

They were halfway to the door again when McQuade glanced, and went suddenly pale at what he saw, though he had been expecting something of the sort. Red Chilton was making a smooth draw, his gun already half clear of the leather.

Dinny McQuade knew the gunman, knew that it was already too late for a warning, but he strove to lurch against Jeff and spoil Chilton's aim.

But before he could act, a gun blasted, loud in the confines of the room, like the rocking thunder of doom. To his amazement, McQuade saw Chilton, gun in hand, gradually wilting down over the table beside which he stood, sprawling across it and sliding to the floor. Then he turned, to see Jeff, his blue eyes fiercely bright, casually blowing the smoke out of his own gun.

"Better not give such signals to your pet gunnies again, LeGrande," he warned. "Not in a room where they have mirrors. One of them might get broken next time—and besides, it's a plumb waste of gunmen."

In a silence compared to which the former quiet seemed to shout, he stepped out to the street again, followed by McQuade.

CHAPTER III

Death Runs Wild

IN THE STREET again McQuade drew a deep breath. His glance at the big man by his sde was respectful now.

"Ye've made a good beginning, Jeff," he said quietly. "Only don't forget, for every varmint ye scotch, two more'll be rearin' their ugly heads."

"In which case, we'll have to be ready to step on them," Jeff nodded. It was only a beginning, and a look around the town, at the scanty equipment, the patent disorganization of the railroad, the organized opposition, had rather dismayed him.

Garth Hamby had spoken of the grim possibility of bankruptcy, and had not exaggerated. Things had gotten into a bad mess.

"But we'll try and handle such things as they come along, and it's an hour, lacking three minutes, before the next deal with LeGrande comes along. So get a crew and tell them to yank that shed out of the way, so that the track-laying can go on. If anybody interferes, send them to me."

"I'll take the engine and go get the crew," McQuade promised. "Right now, they're all siv'ral miles back down the line, fixin' up a bridge over a dry wash, that was burnt last night."

"A lot of such things as that happen? Like the bridge being burned?"

"There's something all the toime. That same bridge has been rebuilt once and repaired twice already."

Jeff's jaw set a little harder.

"Well, get that crew to work, on the jump. Track-laying comes ahead of everything else. We'll get more men for the other jobs."

McQuade hurried. Switching the caboose onto a side-track, he was off down the track in a trailer of black smoke. For the next hour, while Jeff continued his tour of inspection, it was so quiet that you could almost hear a fly buzz.

SHORTLY before the hour was up, he saw a bunch of horsemen heading out of town, with LeGrande among them. Jeff watched with narrowed eyes. The gambler had taken his hint and gotten out of town, keeping well within the time limit.

But LeGrande wasn't the sort to be so easily bluffed, nor could he afford the loss of prestige which such an open retreat would bring. It was some time later that Jeff's tour brought him to the side-track again, where the caboose had been left. Seeing Nora McQuade beside it, he came closer.

"It's a nice day," he commented, sweeping off his big hat. "A beautiful day, in fact, and a beautiful girl."

Nora, busied in hanging a few clothes on a line, turned her back a little more directly on him, humming a snatch of song.

"And you've a pretty voice, Nora darlin'," Jeff added.

She swung suddenly, hurling a bunched-up wet sock, the property of Dinny McQuade. Jeff caught it in one hand, but before she could give voice to what was in her mind, a man tumbled hurriedly out of one of the nearby freight cars and came racing up, his eyes staring and his face white.

"Miss Nora," he gasped. "I just got word over the telegraph, from down the line. A bunch of hoodlums jumped the train, took the engine away from Casey and your dad, and now the engine's headed this way, with your dad and Casey tied up in the cab, and a car of dynamite right behind it—running wide open!"

The roses in Nora's cheeks faded

suddenly, and for a second she looked as if she might faint. Then she straightened again.

"There must be something we can do, Hank."

"What?" Hank demanded. "That engine'll be here in a few minutes, and there's no way of stopping it till it hits that shack. When it does, it'll be derailed, the dynamite will let go—we'd better be getting out of here just as fast as we can travel." He turned and started to run, shouting a wild warning of calamity.

Nora swung suddenly on Jeff. She had been about to say something, but at the look on his face she closed her lips again. Jeff looked around. The impact of that news had hit him just as hard as it had her. If the train was wrecked in such fashion, with a carload of dynamite going off beside the train of equipment placed along the side-track, it would finish the spur right then and there. The fact that it would wreck the town of Lumpjaw, probably killing several people in the process, was only incidental, in so far as LeGrande was concerned.

For there would be huge suits for damages, added to all the rest, litigation and bankruptcy. This was LeGrande's answer to his challenge.

HE SWUNG around, and already there was a smudge of smoke on the horizon, where the engine and its car of death were coming into sight, running wild. Nora's face went a little whiter at the sight, but she was made of stern stuff.

"I'll go warn the town," she said. "They'll just have time to run."

"You do that, Nora darlin'," Jeff agreed. "Just in case I don't manage to stop that engine in time." He turned to where his horse was waiting, swung into the saddle. As he did so, Nora was beside him, her hands reaching up to stop him, her eyes big.

"Jeff," she pleaded, and her voice was unsteady now. "Jeff, my dad's on that engine—"

"I'm not forgettin' that, Nora," Jeff agreed "If I stop it, he'll be all right."

With that he was gone, using the spurs and riding as if he were trying to turn the wedge of a stampede. Nora stood there and watched him, the town and the imminence of her own peril both forgotten.

Jeff was riding hard to meet the runaway, his jaw hard set.

Nora saw the engine bearing down on Jeff, and even though he was a big man on a big horse, he looked like a pigmy as it surged toward him, smoke streaming back in a black line.

Jeff was watching the engine narrowly. He had to time this right, for there would be no second chance. His horse was as distrustful as ever of associating with a fire-breathing monster, but Jeff hurled him along with spurs and the control of a heavy hand on the reins. Then he wheeled suddenly, starting back, swinging up to track.

He had cut it pretty close, and had scarcely more than got his cayuse lined out than the engine swept alongside them, traveling fast.

JEFF SWUNG a little closer, standing up in the stirrups, and

for a moment, Nora's heart seemed to stop beating entirely as she watched him jump. There was an agonizing moment when it looked as if he had missed, then she saw that he had obtained a hold with one hand, and a second later he had disappeared inside the cab.

The hold that he had grabbed had given him quite a jerk, but there was no time to worry about such things.

Sprawled on the floor of the cab, back to back, were McQuade and Casey, who had been trying to untie each other, but with the way the engine was swaying and rolling, it was a wonder that they had even remained on board. Stepping over them, Jeff closed the throttle with a jerk, as he had seen McQuade do, then applied the brake.

For a few seconds, it was a question as to whether the engine would stay on the rails or not; this was his first try at really stopping a locomotive, and it didn't behave quite like a cayuse. Or maybe it did, Jeff reflected, fractious and jerky on the bit. At that, it was a case of stopping quick if it was to be done at all, and with sparks rolling out from under the screeching wheels, they slid to a stop almost beside where Nora was still standing, not a hundred feet from where the shed was still sprawled across the track.

Jeff paused for a moment, wiping the sweat from his face with the swipe of a shirtsleeve, then he reached into a pocket for a knife, and slashed the ropes from McQuade and Casey Ryan. Then he helped them to their feet and down to the ground, in a silence which once more seemed to shout.

On the ground, Dinny McQuade opened his mouth to comment, but stopped as he was engulfed in Nora's arms, with Nora kissing him. She whirled, to give Jeff a flying kiss as he climbed down. Jeff colored, but did not pause. His horse was way back down the track, and he was heading for it at a run.

"Jeff!" McQuade shouted. "Where are you going?"

"LeGrande," Jeff flung back. "See you later."

CHAPTER IV

LeGrande Gambles

JEFF WAS aware that all three of them were still staring after him, though he had no way of guessing how white their faces had gone at his pronouncement. He reached his horse, swung into the saddle again, and headed down the track. LeGrande was somewhere off there, and his hour was up—whether he knew it or not.

Jeff's hunch that he wouldn't have far to go to find him was soon verified. The gambler had risked everything on the biggest chance of his career, figuring that nothing could stop that engine of destruction which he had loosed on the town. Now he was heading back for a look, coming on horseback.

But now, as he rode, there was a growing uneasiness in his manner. He should have heard the explosion, should have seen a distant cloud of dust.

Topping a small rise in the uneven face of the prairie, he pulled his horse to a sudden stop at sight of another horseman. Jeff knew that the gambler had recognized him. LeGrande stared for a long moment in silence, his lips tightening a little. Then casually, he dismounted, leaving his horse to stand, sauntered over to take shelter behind a gray-green sandstone boulder which rose shoulder high, one of a scattered clump of big stones here close by the right of way.

It was easy to see what he planned. To make Jeff take the offensive, to wait there behind cover until the cowboy came within pistol range, then shoot him down. Jeff's eyes narrowed, and for a few minutes he rode without swerving. Then, coming within gun range, he was at the vanguard of the boulders, and he left his own horse for the shelter of the nearest.

From there, a minute later, he made a quick run which brought him closer

to where LeGrande waited. His move had caught the gambler by surprise, for no shot had been fired.

"Better not try that again, Boone," LeGrande warned. His voice was cool, untroubled. "If you do, I'll have to kill you."

"I've hunted coyotes before," Jeff retorted. "I gave you an hour to travel in, and that was up quite some spell back. Either I take you back to hang, or shoot you."

"Neither of those appeals to me, particularly, but don't say I didn't warn you," LeGrande drawled, and flung a quick shot as Jeff made another dash. This was risky business. LeGrande had been forced to shoot fast, but even at that the bullet grazed the top of Jeff's head, parting his hair for him, and he could feel the twitch of it as it jerked at his hat.

BUT HE had attained his objective in that last rush, had taken shelter now behind another boulder, only twenty feet from where LeGrande crouched.

"That was careless of me," LeGrande commented. "I won't miss a second time."

Jeff waited, without reply. It would be suicide for either of them to venture into the open now, to try and cross that last open space, and both of them knew it.

To wait here, sniping back and forth, until one of them moved incautiously and the other got in a lucky shot—but it wouldn't work out that way. Somebody would be along, to help one of them, before much more time had passed.

That was what LeGrande was gambling on, and had been from the start. Off at one side, Jeff glimpsed a figure that skulked Indian fashion. One of LeGrande's gunmen, working to do a sneak around to where he could gun Jeff from the rear, exposing him to a cross-fire.

"It never pays to interfere with me, Boone," LeGrande called, matter-of-factly. "Too many have tried it already. I don't tolerate interference. In about two minutes it will be all over with but burying you—providing I take the trouble to do that."

Jeff grinned. He had known as well as LeGrande that reaching that last boulder entailed a lot of extra risk, and offered no additional advantage so far as trading lead was concerned. But he had been counting on LeGrande having help. He prepared his answer now, shaking out the loop of the lariat which he had slung over his shoulder before leaving his horse.

It sailed out, dropping down over the boulder, and twitched shut with a jerk. The sudden panting resistance against the pull of it told Jeff that it had pinned the gambler fast before he realized what was happening, and two seconds later, going up hand over hand, Jeff was beside him, before the gambler could wriggle a hand loose.

"Looks like I take you back to hang. At that, you're long overdue for the job."

JEFF WAS working casually. Without apparent haste, his gun was in his hand, flinging a quick shot, and it was followed by a yelp, then the gunman staggered out from behind a rock, his arm hanging limp, blood running down and dripping from his fingers.

"If you want to get on your horse and ride, and keep on riding, all right," Jeff nodded to him. "Though if you'd prefer to come along back to town and be hung, why, I don't have no special objections. We'll find rope for all."

LeGrande was cursing, but his wounded henchman lost no time in availing himself of Jeff's invitation to slope. Jeff brought up LeGrande's cayuse, herded his captive into the saddle and tied him there. Then, with the gambler riding ahead of him, and Jeff's loop around his neck, they headed back toward Lumpjaw.

A mixed procession watched them enter the town. LeGrande's own followers, who comprised about half the floating population, were alert and sullen, but making no overt move for the moment. News of that dynamite car and what had impended, and how Jeff had stopped it, had got around.

Everyone was there to meet them,

from the looks—a crowd divided against itself, and for the moment warily neutral. Jeff had eyes for none of them. He searched the crowd until he found Nora, with her father and Casey Ryan, and headed for them. Nora ran forward a few steps.

"You got him," she exclaimed a little breathlessly. "You—as a cowpuncher, you seem to make a grand railroader."

Jeff grinned.

"You know," he confided, looking down into her black eyes, "there ain't so much difference between this and punching cows, at that. I sort of figure I'm going to like railroading."

ALREADY, under Dinny McQuade's orders, the crew had fallen on the shack which blocked the track and were heaving it bodily out of the way. Now Casey Ryan gestured with a big thumb.

"Comes the marshal," he said. "Name of Tully—Sam Tully. Has an ingrown disposition, like some folks do toenails, and suffers more acute from it."

Jeff studied him a moment. Tully was a big man, and he walked like a strutting turkey gobbler, with his badge pinned prominently out in front of a prominent front.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. "I give orders not to touch that building—" He stopped, his eyes, rather too prominent to begin with, seeming about to pop from his head as he beheld LeGrande. "What's the idea?" he wheezed.

"Just bringing LeGrande in to hang him," Jeff explained. "Haven't you heard that I gave him an hour to quit the country in? He made the mistake of lingering."

"*You* give him an hour to get out of town?" Tully hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, in pathetic imitation of LeGrande himself. "Since when did you start givin' orders around here? I'm marshal of this town."

"I started giving orders a couple of hours ago," Jeff explained. "And when anybody interferes with the spur, I'll keep right on giving them. Don't make any mistake about that. Now, how about it? Do you want to string this mistake up in your official capacity, or do we go ahead and finish the job?"

"Yuh're takin' a high-handed tone," Tully warned, but his voice lacked conviction. "I'll lock him up, if yuh want to file charges against him, and then he can be tried by doo process of law. But I won't have no hangin' out of hand."

"Lock him up, then," Jeff agreed. He distrusted the marshal on general principles, but it would be better to work with the law than against it, if possible. Besides, there was a difference between shooting it out with LeGrande, if he had refused to heed the warning to move in an hour, and hanging him now that he was a prisoner.

"The charge is that he captured Dinny McQuade and Casey Ryan, tied them up in their own cab, and then turned their engine loose to run wild, heading straight for town here with that car of dynamite on behind. With the intention of blowing the whole town to kingdom come. If you let him get away, Marshal, I wouldn't give two cents for your own hide—not in the mood a lot of these folks are in right now.

There was an ominous growl of assent from the assembled crowd. Even some of those who had rather favored LeGrande echoed it. The sort of wholesale and indiscriminate slaughter that he had aimed to indulge in failed to strike a responsive chord in their breasts right now.

"I'll look him up, like yuh say," the marshal agreed, almost hastily. A new brand of law had come to Lumpjaw.

CHAPTER V

Barrier Ranch

THE NEXT week was a busy one for Jeff and every man connected with the spur. Things were commencing to move; he had hired another hundred men, with the promise of a bonus for every man who did good work, provided that the spur advanced its line of

steel another hundred miles in the time limit which faced them.

Old hands shook their heads pessimistically. It looked impossible. But again, considering Jeff Boone himself, they tightened their belts or hitched their galluses around, spat on their hands and went to work.

And during that week, steel ran for fifteen miles out beyond Lumpjaw, taking a big bite out of the hundred miles which menaced them. There was little grading necessary for that week, and under Jeff's driving presence the men worked as if possessed. For the moment, too, there was almost an entire absence of trouble. LeGrande was behind bars, and the thing that he had tried to do had aroused the crew to a fighting fury. They were laying track now.

"But it's too good to last," Hank Measen, telegrapher and general clerk and handy man, protested worriedly, fingering his two-story chin and gazing down a long nose at it. Hank, under fear of that lurching car of wildly running dynamite, had taken inglorious to his heels, but he had come back and gone to work with a sheepish grin, and Jeff liked him. He was inclined to be pessimistic, but he was a good worker.

"Yuh've got everybody workin' efficient for the first time on this job," he went on. "And really layin' track. But once we go another fifteen-twenty miles, and hit the hills—that'll be a diff'rent story. And all this is too good to last."

As if in verification, he stood in the doorway of his movable office, a box car, and yelled at Jeff an hour later, waving a yellow sheet of paper in one hand, almost triumphantly.

"Told yuh trouble'd be breakin' again," he proclaimed. "Knew them yahoos that's tryin' to stop us 'd have more cussedness up their sleeves. Well, it's come. I got two messages here."

"Give me the best first," Jef instructed.

"Well, mebby this is that. It's from back down the line, and says that D. H. Macy, who's superintendent of the railroad, and next in line to Old Man Hamby himself, is arrivin' in Lumpjaw today. Comin' on a special train to inspect things."

"What's so bad about that?"

"Oh, nothin'." Hank rubbed at his nose. "Fact is, Macy's just a young feller like yoreself, and considerable of a hustler. Right likeable sort of a cuss. On'y, way I look at it, when yuh've got trouble on hand, it don't help none to have a boss watchin' over yore shoulder at how yuh do it. Easier to go ahead on yore own—a man like you, that ain't afraid to go ahead."

"Thanks," Jeff grinned. "And now for the rest of the bad news."

"Yeah. We're right up ag'in' the Barrier Ranch with our track, ain't we?"

"Just about. We'll reach it by night, anyway."

THE BARRIER Ranch was aptly named. It was a small empire in itself, set in front of the mountains, the last stretch of fairly level land and easy going remaining before they reached the Hellgate. Across it were some foothills, but nothing bad. Hank spat.

"Lon Hensley, who owns the Barrier, he says now we can't build through his land a-tall."

"Eh?" Jeff straightened. "How come we can't build through the Barrier? Hensley agreed to give us a right of way, way back last year, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he agreed then so to do," Hank nodded. "Do yuh know this here Hensley?"

"Don't believe I've ever had the pleasure of his acquaintance."

"Man, it wouldn't be no pleasure—not for you. Hensley, ownin' the Barrier and bein' a big cattleman, why, yuh'd sort of cal'clate him to be more'n just a sheepman under the skin."

"But that's all he is. He's a little, shifty-eyed, sawed-off runt, just as warped by nature as he is by size. He says now that agreement was made about a right of way last year, and that since then he's changed his mind. That if we so much as set foot on the Barrier, whoever does so will get plugged."

Jeff's eyes brightened a little. He recognized the old strategy—waiting until the last moment to inform them that there had been a change of mind.

"Things have been getting too settled for any use," he nodded. "If it comes to that, I reckon we got a bigger crew than that old cow thief has. And just as good when it comes to using a gun."

"Mebbo so," Hank conceded. "But he claims our boys have been trespassin' lately, and he's gone to court at Lumpjaw and got an injunction out ag'in' us. And the marshal, of course, he backs Hensley in this."

"Tully hasn't any authority outside of Lumpjaw."

"Mebby not, as marshal, but he's got hisself made sheriff for the county, now. And yuh know what an injunction is. They'll aim to tie us up in the courts for months. And if we can't keep going, looks to me like we're licked. It's a dozen miles across the Barrier, and twenty around, either way. Looks to me like we ain't got no choice but to go across."

"We'll go across," Jeff agreed. "Keep the boys busy, right up to the line. There's work enough to keep them going for a day or so. I'll go in to Lumpjaw and meet Macy, and handle this at the same time."

"You want an engine to ride in on?"

"No. I'll take my horse. Kind of feel more at home in the saddle."

AS HE WAS swinging into the saddle, he had a glimpse of Nora McQuade, at the door of the caboose. She flashed him a smile which would have made a cigar-store Indian dance a hornpipe, and Jeff's spirits lifted.

By way of flavoring, there was more news when he reached Lumpjaw. There had been a jail break the night before, and LeGrande had departed for the time being, though promising to come back in his own good time. The town was buzzing with it.

Jeff wasn't much surprised. But a train was just pulling in, and guessing rightly that this would carry the superintendent, he walked over, in time to see D. H. Macy himself swing down, pausing for a moment on the lower step to gaze around with quick, appraising gray eyes.

He was a man of near Jeff's own age, as Hank had said, and he would tip the scales at around a hundred and eighty-five, standing an even six feet. He was good looking in other ways as well. Now his eyes fastened briefly on Jeff, then he had swung on down and crossed half the intervening space, holding out his hand with a smile.

"You'll be Jeff Boone, our new trouble-shooter," he declared. "I've heard too much about you already not to know you. I'm Macy. I hear you've been doing a good job since you took over, Boone, and that's what we want. But what's this I hear about new trouble concerning the right of way?"

"Chances are you've heard as much as I have," Jeff said. "They tell me that Hensley has got an injunction against our building across his Barrier Ranch. I'm aiming to look into it right away."

Macy whistled between his teeth.

"An injunction, eh? Worse than I heard. It sounds bad. But we'll have to do something. I'll go right on out to end of steel now, if that's the case."

"And I'm going over to the court house and have a look at some records," Jeff nodded. "See you later."

Macy was staring after him as he swung off down the street, but his train was pulling out again before Jeff reached the court house. Men watched him curiously. It was plain that the news of this new trouble had spread, and with the escape of LeGrande as well, people were wondering what he would do next.

THIS INJUNCTION was a bit more subtle than the methods which the opposition had been using up to now, and it might be a lot harder to fight. But Jeff had a hunch, and he was playing it already. He opened the door, walked in, and climbed the steps to the second floor. As he started down a dusky corri-

dor, his way was suddenly blocked as the door marked Sheriff's Office opened, and Sam Tully thrust his bulk out, scowling.

"What yuh want here?" he demanded.

Jeff, from the superior height of three inches, smiled down at him.

"Behold, a pillar of the law," he murmured softly. "I understand your jail leaks prisoners, Tully."

"Accidents 'll happen," Tully growled, a little uneasily. "What did yuh want here?"

"I'm looking for the early bird." Jeff's hunch grew stronger. He must be right—and these others had a suspicion, and were aiming to forestall him if they could.

"That ain't enough." Tully elevated his nose, so that his swelling chest, or what passed for that, lifted his badge of office again. "Anyway, yuh won't find it here."

"No bird, but a worm," Jeff sighed. "But what's it to you?"

"This place is closed for the day," Tully blustered. "So yuh better trot along. Here, yuh're just wastin' yore time."

"My, my, the way you tax-eaters close up in the middle of the day will need looking into," Jeff chided. "Though in the case of your office I don't suppose it makes any difference." He made to brush past, but Tully edged in front again.

Without further words, Jeff reached out suddenly, and before Tully quite knew what was happening, he had lifted the bulk of him bodily off the floor. Holding him, kicking and squirming futilely, he carried him to an open window, paused to glance out, and with a pleased expression heaved the sheriff out and down, head first, into a rain barrel. The water splashed high and wide as the sheriff immersed; the barrel, before the deluge of flesh, split.

"That's my good deed for the day," Jeff grinned. He turned, to see a scared looking clerk watching him.

"Show me the recorder's office," he instructed. "And lend a hand."

CHAPTER VI

Barriers Brushed Away

JEFF HAD finished his immediate job and was out in the dusky corridor again by the time the sheriff returned. He had spent the interim in changing his clothes, Jeff saw, but despite his immersion, he seemed hotter than ever.

"You're under arrest," he proclaimed. "For assaultin' and resistin' an officer."

Jeff halted, grinning expectantly down at him again.

"I didn't resist none," he protested. "You done all the kicking around. Is there any water left in that barrel?"

He stared at Tully, his smile broadening. The sheriff gulped suddenly and paled a little. He said nothing more as Jeff brushed past him and walked out of the building. Men in town still watched with interest, but his face revealed nothing as he got his horse and headed back toward end of steel again.

Arrived there, he selected a dozen men who could swing a pick-handle or use a six-gun with equal facility, and started out with them on horseback, for the Barrier, a couple of miles beyond. Reaching the edge of it, he was not surprised to see at least a score of Hensley's men lounging there; some of them had been lounging in the saloons of Lumpjaw most of the time for the last week, and were now wearing chaps and spurs for probably the first time in their careers, awkwardly trying to keep from falling over their own feet.

With them were Sam Tully and a couple of deputies. Since Jeff hadn't hurried, they could easily have reached there ahead of him, by taking a slightly different route out of town. The whole crew were watching Jeff expectantly, but he disappointed them by leading his own men off toward the west, and out of sight in a long draw. From that they circled, on to the Barrier.

"I just want kind of a look at this, to get it straight in my mind," Jeff explained, "since it's new country to me. Bill, you claim to have been

raised in this section. That'll be Baldy Mountain off there, I take it?"

Billy Luby, an elongated toothpick which had been dangerously split in two in the middle, shifted his chew of tobacco from one cheek to the other, sent a brown stream to flood an unwary bug toiling across the desert expanse of a rock, and nodded.

"Yeah, that's Baldy," he nodded. "Me'n it have that much in common." And he removed his hat briefly to mop its glistening nudity with a big red bandanna.

"Then that'll be Niggerhead Rock off there?"

"Yeah, that's Niggerhead. Ain't got much in common with it tuhday. I washed up last night."

"Then that has to be Beaver Creek in between, running right where it belongs. Everything seems to be plumb in place, like a porcupine's quills. Which is a right comfortin' discovery."

JEFF TURNED to lead the way back, going straight, this time, without attempt at concealment.

"Tomorrow," he added, seeing their itching curiosity, "we'll go ahead with layin' track."

They rode up, presently, to where the Barrier guards were still gathered, coming from the rear. Someone started, pointed, and they were at once the focus of lively curiosity. Bill Luby grunted.

"Hensley, he's j'ined up with them," he nodded. "Look at that yeller shirt he's got on. Just a polecat. Looks pretty, but don't always act so."

"You know him, Bill?"

"Yeah. Just like a prairie dawg does a lurkin' coyote." Bill ejected his whole wad in the profundity of his disgust.

From the ugly looks cast their way, Jeff realized that there was a good chance for trouble, here and now—or would have been, only for the fact that D. H. Macy had joined the group as well, and seemed to be earnestly conferring with the boss of the Barrier.

Tully, with plenty of tough backing, stared at them with open hostility as they jogged straight up to join the group, and shoved his impressive bulk to the fore.

"Sneakin' around to get on this land after we've ordered yuh to stay off, eh?" he growled. "That's breakin' the law, as duly injunctioned—"

"Now, now, Sheriff," Macy cut in placatingly, throwing him a big, good-natured grin. "There's no law against looking at the scenery, and that's all the boys have been doing. And of course we're going to settle this thing, anyway. That's what I'm here for." He flashed a reproving glance at Jeff.

"You really shouldn't have bothered with looking at the scenery just now, Boone," he added. "But I think that I have got matters just about ironed out with Mr. Hensley. If we have to buy a right of way, why, buy it we will."

Jeff eased out of the saddle and faced Hensley.

"You was aiming to give the Northern a right of way across your land last year, I understand?" he inquired. "Figuring it would add a lot to the value of your property?"

'That was my first idea," Hensley conceded, and his voice was like the squeaking rasp of a buzz saw through a green log. "But a man has a right to change his mind," he added defensively. "It's worth a lot to the railroad to go through there."

"Perhaps. Though a different route would have been chosen, last year, but for your agreement at the time. A route which would have missed the edge of your land by twenty miles, leaving you with long drives for your stock and long hauls for your supplies. Also giving the Northern a somewhat easier route for its entire distance, though some ten miles longer a total."

"Yuh seem to be well posted on the railroad, for workin' on it just a week," Hensley half snarled.

"I've made it my business to get posted. Your agreement then, while verbal, was made before witnesses—that the Northern could go through free. And you were mighty eager to have us do it."

"A verbal agreement ain't binding. And I've changed my mind."

"A verbal agreement might be binding enough, except that a couple of our witnesses have had the bad luck to meet with fatal accidents since then, and the others who were present are now in your employ, so of course they wouldn't remember anything about it."

MACY HELD up his hand again. "Why rake up all the old unpleasantness, Boone?" he demanded. "I told you that I had this about smoothed out. Facts are facts, and we have to face them whether they are pleasant or not. We're buying a right of way across."

"For how much?" Jeff demanded bluntly.

"Mr. Hensley is holding out for seventy thousand dollars, but I have hopes of making him see that the sum is too high. However, Mr. Hensley, we will pay half that—"

Jeff's eyes narrowed sharply. He took a swift step forward, and Hensley stepped back a little nervously.

"Since when, Macy," Jeff cut in, "has the Northern got enough cash that it can afford to throw it around that reckless—for something not worth a tenth that much?"

"If yuh go through my land, yuh'll pay for it," Hensley growled, glowering at Jeff.

"As it happens, I am handling this matter, Boone," Macy added, a little resentment creeping into his voice. "And as trouble-shooter, it hardly comes within your province—"

"Maybe not, but you'll likely be interested in knowing that we're going right ahead, laying track and grading, tomorrow," Jeff nodded. "Or maybe some sooner. Straight ahead, and without paying Hensley a red cent."

"Try it, and see how far yuh get!" Hensley's face purpled.

"If yuh tamper with the law, yuh'll land in the calaboose," Tully thrust forward to warn.

Macy opened his mouth, but Jeff silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"I took a little trip to the court house, and looked over the records today," he snapped. "I smelled a rat, and your rats smelled a cat, and tried to stop me—but public records are still public. You claim to own a lot of land in your Barrier, Hensley. And you do have title to a few thousand acres, that you run your cattle over, and your punchers filed on, then turned over to you after you'd proved up on it."

He silenced the spluttering ranch owner with another wave, went grimly on.

"But the records show that you don't own a foot of the land that the railroad is going across—or land within a mile of it. It's all government land yet, and we have permission from the government to build on it. So," and he smiled at them now with a flash of big white teeth, "your injunction don't apply. It's you who are trespassing—on railroad right of way. And I'm giving you just an hour to get off of it—and stay off!"

There was a startled look on Macy's face.

"Are you sure about this?" he demanded.

"Plenty sure."

"There ain't a word of truth in it," Hensley howled suddenly, as if the meaning of what Jeff had said had just sunk in. "And if yuh try trespassin' against a court order, yuh'll run afoul of the law."

"Yes, we can't do that," Macy exclaimed. "Not when there's an injunction against us. It will have to be dissolved first—"

"That injunction applies to land owned by Hensley. It can't apply to government land, for that's outside the jurisdiction of the court," Jeff retorted impatiently. "You heard what I said."

"See here, Boone." Macy swung angrily. "I won't have you involving the railroad in a lot of trouble with the law. I know what that leads to. I'm in charge here, and—"

Jeff eyed him quizzically. Before the look in his eyes, Macy's tongue seemed to falter.

"Either you're a fool," Jeff nodded sardonically, "or else you're a crook."

"You can't talk to me that way," Macy flared, and the veins in his forehead bulged unpleasantly. He

stepped up in front of Jeff squarely.

"You're fired."

Jeff shrugged.

"When I get ready to be fired, Macy, it'll take the man that hired me to do it. Right now I'm too busy with with track-laying to be bothered. Which reminds me that there's no point in waiting till tomorrow and wasting time. Get busy, boys, with the job. On the jump, now."

CHAPTER VII

Blow Below the Belt

FOR A MOMENT, Macy stared as though doubting the evidence of his ears. Then suddenly, with total unexpectedness, he grinned.

"Hanged if I don't believe the Old Man has got just what we need this time—a real trouble-shooter, he declared. Maybe you're right, Boone. But watch your step. I'm with you, only I don't want you to bite off more than you can chew."

"My business is to see that this railroad gets built, and time don't stop for no two-by-four politicians, which clutter up the woods around here and overflow plenty on to the prairie," Jeff answered. If Macy wanted to back down and take it that way, all right. If he wanted trouble, Jeff was ready for that, too.

He might be misjudging the man, who had flashes of a very real charm. But some of his actions today had been highly suspicious, and Jeff was remembering what Garth Hamby had said to him: that there were spies and traitors in their own ranks.

Already, since he had issued the order, and not stopping for private troubles, the railroad crew, which had been moving up with their equipment to the very edge of the Barrier, were starting to work. It didn't require much grading along here to get it ready for laying track, and Jeff's object now was to get the rails down as quickly as possible. Any sort of a track which was level enough and solid enough for trains to run over. Ballast and the finer touches could be completed at leisure, once the line was built.

The sheriff looked bewildered. Things were moving too fast for him, and his authority was a cloak that didn't fit. Lon Hensley, however, was made of sterner stuff. He hadn't acquired control of the vast empire of Barrier Ranch, to most of which he held no legal title, by half-hearted methods, and now even that shadowy title itself was being challenged. He waited a moment, then, as the first workmen crossed the line which he had set up, he waved his hand in imperious order.

Instantly, his own crew responded with a fusilade of lead. A good part of it was aimed high, by way of warning, but whether Hensley's original order had been so worded or not, some of them let enthusiasm triumph over discretion. As the echoes crashed from the far rim of a canyon and the smoke cleared, a couple of the Spur crew were sprawled on the ground, one of them lying very still.

Jeff's face darkened. Here was the makings of real war, in the next minute or so—depending on whatever order he gave. The faces of the railroaders had gone white, then red, and knuckles gripped around pick and shovel handles were pale with the sudden strain.

MEN WERE looking to him. There was a slightly greenish hue about the sheriff's face, and even Hensley looked suddenly nervous, as he realized what would happen if that crew, outnumbering his own men ten to one, should charge to the attack. Pick-handles were a bad weapon, shovels could cleave skulls like butter, and plenty of them, like Jeff, had guns and knew how to use them.

But every man was hesitating now, waiting Jeff's further orders. There was uproar along with the indecision, and Jeff strained his ears suddenly, waiting.

"You damn fool, do you want to spoil everything?" Macy was hissing at Hensley. His voice was low but furious. "This is no time for killing!"

"Well, yore schemes don't seem to be working out so good," Hensley re-

torted truculently. They halted, abashed, as they made the disconcerting discovery that Jeff had heard those few but meaty words.

"You dirty traitor!" he said, and though his own words were low-pitched as well, they carried as much meaning as could have been written into a book. "LeGrande is just a hanger-on, but you are superintendent of the Northern, and knifing it in the back—"

It was easy for Macy to see that Jeff was getting ready to amplify his words with something stronger, and his whole crew was tense, poised for the word which would sweep them forward for a general clean-up. They'd had no suspicion of Macy himself, beyond thinking that he was a tenderfoot and more or less of a darned fool, but that was what they had come to expect anyway of most of the higher-ups.

Macy had gone pale. Jeff knew that he had plenty of nerve, but this was a crisis that he hadn't been ready for, one where anything could happen. Fire was ready for gunpowder.

The next moment, flushed and excited, Nora McQuade was among them.

Jeff stared for a moment, more startled than by any of the events of the past few minutes. A swift glance over his shoulder gave him the explanation. Under cover of the excitement, the supply train, which had been on the side-track a couple of miles back, had been brought up to end of steel, now only a couple of hundred yards away, and where the train went, Nora's post-office caboose went along.

She had jumped down immediately and come running over, and now every eye was suddenly fixed on her —all with the knowledge that this would be no time to start a general melee, with her in the middle of it.

Nora ran straight to where Jeff and Macy were standing, and in between them, smiling at both. Then, while Jeff stared with sagging jaw, she snuggled up against D. H. Macy's broad chest, while one of his arms draped itself protectingly around her shoulder, and she was looking up at him in a way both tantalizing and proud.

"Sure and it does my heart good that you're here, Dave, just when you're needed to help out," she declared. "For, darlin', though I never saw a man aside from yourself to equal Jeff here, it looks to me like there's plenty for both of you to handle, and 'tis proud I am to be working with two such men in the building of the railroad. Jeff, you'll have met Dave already, of course, and I know the two of you will be friends. I couldn't bear it otherwise, with the man I'm going to marry, and another grand man like Jeff here."

SHE SMILED at both of them again, that devastating smile that Jeff knew was the prettiest he had ever seen, and for the life of him, Jeff couldn't tell whether she had suspected that maybe they hadn't liked each other any too well to begin with, or if she was just so happy that her tongue was kind of running away with her.

For it was easy to see how much she liked this Dave Macy, just from the way she looked up at him, to say nothing of her adding those words about him being the man she was going to marry.

For an instant Jeff felt wobbly on his feet. To marry! Suddenly he knew the truth, in a blinding, devastating revelation—he loved Nora McQuade himself.

Dave Macy was big and handsome, and he had a likeable way with him, which Jeff had felt from the first. But Macy was a traitor; there was no longer any doubt that Macy was the man who was responsible for all the delays which were wrecking the Northern. Men like LeGrande were just his tools, at best.

In another ten seconds, under the burning anger of that discovery, Jeff had been set to deal with the situation as it seemed to require. To settle it, directly, once for all. But now things looked different.

"Nora, darling, you shouldn't be here," Macy protested. "We seem to be having a little trouble."

"Sure, and I'm used to that." Nora

tossed her head. "And I'm not a bit worried abut trouble, with two such men as you and Jeff here."

"Next thing, I'll be getting jealous of Jeff," Macy grinned; then he frowned at Hensley. "It doesn't look as though your gunmen had hurt our boys bad," he commented, for the man who had been sprawled motionless was stirring now as he was ministered to. "But if things go on, somebody is sure to get hurt—bad. Hadn't we better call a truce and talk things over? What do you think, Jeff?"

JEFF WAS still a little dazed by the way things were happening. But he could understand what Macy was driving at, well enough. It was to him that Macy was talking, suggesting a truce. The real truce was to be between them. By it, Macy meant that Jeff could keep his job, and do the best he could do with it, if he would keep his mouth shut about Macy, and not betray him to Nora.

It sounded like a big order, but he had to admire the cool way Macy had of carrying it off. Where most men would be badly flustered, Macy was coolly taking advantage of the breaks. And Jeff could see, as he had done, that, for the present at least, there was nothing else to do. Unless he drove to a showdown right now, proving Macy's treachery to the board of directors of the railroad wouldn't be easy. The others would back Macy's word, not Jeff's.

Bigger than that, by far, was Nora McQuade. Nora had proclaimed, by look and gesture, by her declaration that she was going to marry Macy, that she loved him. For her sake, he had to play the game.

"Looks like a truce would be the best way out of it," he agreed.

Macy flashed him a glance, over the top of Nora's head, and though he rather hated and despised the man —hated him on account of Nora, and despised him as a traitor—Jeff found himself almost admiring him as well. It was easy to see that there were things about the superintendent which would account for a nice girl like Nora McQuade liking him the way she did.

Since Macy had suggested it, there was nothing for Hensley to do but agree to a truce as well. It was a few minutes later that Jeff found himself momentarily alone with Macy.

"It's a truce, then?" Macy demanded anxiously. "Between the two of us? You to keep your job—and not to betray me?"

"That's the way it stands, I guess," Jeff agreed. "Not that the job has anything to do with it. And I'm warning you, Macy, it'll be war. For this road is going to be built."

"Well, we can fight as friends, at least," Macy suggested.

"Maybe," Jeff agreed warily. "But you'll not be using her in any of it, Macy—don't forget that."

MACY LOOKED at him a moment, frowning a little. Then he grinned and extended his hand, and, after a moment, Jeff took it.

"So you've fallen for her yourself, eh?" Macy commented. "Well, I can't wonder at that any. As you say, she's out of it. It just happens that I love her, Jeff—and I'd kill anybody who did a thing to hurt her."

"Yeah? Some day, she'll find out that you're trying to wreck the railroad that she's trying to build. And maybe you haven't discovered she loves this railroad about the way most little girls do a pet doll. How about that?"

"She wants a railroad built—and there'll be one. What difference does it make who builds it? And you've promised me not to tell; so I don't think she'll find out."

There was plenty of meaning which had been crowded into that sentence without being put into words. Jeff understood it. His own grin was thin.

"I'm driving ahead to lay track," he said shortly. "Tell your friend Hensley to get out of the way in an hour—or we go ahead anyway."

"I'll tell him," Macy agreed. "But I have an idea that he'll fight, and I can't say that I blame him. He figured on a cut of fifty thousand out of this, and you've spoiled that."

"You'd better not think in such big

terms again," Jeff warned. "They're way too lavish for a railroad that's hard up."

With that, he returned to where Hensley and the sheriff were still talking the matter over, and his grin widened as he saw that they did not seem pleased to see him.

"This time I'm giving you buzzards fifteen minutes to get out of here—and to stay off this right of way," he warned without preamble. "After that, it'll be open season on any of your stripe of polecats that we catch running around where they're not wanted."

"I'm not budgin' a foot," Hensley warned, and if it was a bluff, Jeff knew that it was a good one. "The law says yuh can't trespass, and yuh ain't going to."

"Trespassin' works both ways," Jeff pointed out. "I've said all I'm going to, Hensley."

"If yuh start anything, the law—" Tully began, when Jeff cut him short.

"That warning goes for you too, star-toter. Better travel while the going's good."

Turning, he waved his hand, and his waiting crew moved up again. It was showdown. Since he could not afford to be anywhere else, Macy came along with the eager crew. Not far off, Nora McQuade was watching.

Hensley wasn't bluffing, either. Jeff saw that he gave a signal to his own crew. They were ready for action, and Jeff knew instinctively that it was himself they were aiming for. Macy had moved up to stand beside Jeff, since Nora was watching.

One of the railroad men had dropped a sledge hammer. Now, one of Hensley's men picked it up, slung it with a sudden heave. The thing happened in a flashing second. It had been aimed for Jeff, but the aim was none too good. Instead it was hurtling straight for Macy. The superintendent tried to dodge, stumbled instead and went down on hands and knees. Nora's scream echoed high and dreadful. For Macy had fallen into a position where it seemed that the heavy hammer would not merely hit him, but would brain him like a felled ox.

CHAPTER VIII

All Roads Lead to Roam

THERE WAS no time for thinking. Jeff's action was instinctive. Before he quite knew how it had come about, he had hurled himself in front of Macy. The hurtling sledge hammer struck his leg, sent him down in a sprawling heap.

Dave Macy had come close to death in that moment, close enough to feel its chill breath blowing in his face, and he knew it. He stared, half unbelieving still, until aroused by a new factor.

With Jeff down, one of Hensley's gun crew was dragging his iron, cooly determined on finishing him off. There was just one thing to be done again, and Macy did it, as Jeff had done—he flung himself in the way in turn, and as the gun cracked, went sprawling down on top of the trouble-shooter.

There was dynamite in the air; Hensley saw it, and stopped the fight, waving both arms wildly and cursing his own crew to sullen silence. It had not been his intention for anything to happen to Macy, and the sight of disaster striking twice in almost as many seconds had shaken him.

"And damn lucky for him that he called off his gunnies," one of the railroaders grumbled, swinging a spade. "Another five seconds and we'd have waded through them like a snowplow in a cotton storm."

Nora had run in, one short cry like a wail broken off in desperation as she came, then she was hovering over Jeff and Macy. She gave back a little as men stooped to pick them up, working with rough gentleness.

Jeff caught a glimpse of her face, with the roses all gone and as white as paper, and the way her eyes swung from him to Macy and back again told him that a part of her apprehension was for him as well. He shook his head, brushed aside the helping hands, and stood on his own feet, wincing a little. There was a swelling lump on his left leg just below the hip, which would give him

grief enough for a while, but no bones had been broken.

Macy had not come out of it so well. He had taken the bullet in his left shoulder, but a quick examination disclosed that it was only a flesh wound, not too serious. Macy made a wry face as Jeff examined the wound, then contrived to grin.

"Reckon we're too tough a pair to kill, eh, Jeff?" he demanded.

They surveyed each other with a new mutual respect. If it weren't for those barriers which had been so swiftly erected between them, Jeff had a feeling that it would be easy for them to be friends. And then Nora had an arm around each of them,, her voice rang with pride.

"Oh, I saw it all," she exclaimed. "How you saved each other's life! Two grand men—to build a railroad!"

THAT WAS that; the line of steel was creeping forward again, the grading crew sweating to keep ahead of the track-layers. Jeff paused for a moment to watch them, pride in his eyes.

A little way up ahead, picks swung, shovels glinted in the sun, horses and mules moved in a steady haze of dust, with men behind them, guiding plows or swinging their weight on big scrapers. A charge of dynamite thundered dully and a boulder cracked to pieces, was broken up with swinging sledges.

Closer at hand, a couple of flat cars shoved their thin snouts forward, the locomotive, with Dinny McQuade at the throttle, puffing impatiently behind them, the work train linked behind it. Ties were shoved off one side of the first flat, to be grabbed by men in undershirts and plumped down, hastily straightened and leveled off, while steel rails were pushed up from the second flat and off, to be seized in turn by half a dozen sweating men, run out and dropped in position.

Tie plates would be affixed by others, the blunt, square-headed spikes hammered in, fastening one end, then the flanges of the wheels on the flat car, inching forward, would catch the loose rail, adjusting it to a swift exactness, more spikes would pound home along the length of it, a water boy would toil excitedly up and down the lines. These men were working!

Since Dave Macy's wound was bad enough to be unpleasant, and Dave Macy was a personage on the Northern, his own private car was run up to the heels of the work train and Macy loaded on board, submitting now to being carried, since he was pale from shock and loss of blood.

"Take him to a hospital," Jeff instructed. "Go as easy as you can over the rough spots in the track."

"I'm going along to see that he gets there all right," Nora announced.

Macy contrived a faint grin. There was a glint of triumph in his eyes as he looked at Jeff.

"This makes up for being shot," he said.

It would, Jeff reflected bitterly, watching the train pull out. A sense of defeat, of desolation, swept over him for a moment. Nora loved the fellow, and was going to marry him. Of course she'd go along to nurse him. Well, that was that—and his leg ached infernally. He turned, limping, toward the car which served as his own headquarters and living quarters. Hank Measen came in presently, bringing a pail of steaming hot water and a couple of thick towels over his arm.

"Got a bad charley horse there, haven't you?" he commented, surveying the swelling. "Here, you take off your duds and stretch out on that bunk, and I'll put some hot compresses on it."

Jeff swore at him.

"What do you think I am?" he demanded. "A railroad superintendent, or a baby? I've got work to do."

Hank grinned at him.

"And you've got a damned bad leg," he said practically. "You stay in bed till morning, and with plenty of hot water, you'll be able to hobble by then. And this will hurt plenty, on that purple knob. But without it you'd be laid up for a week. And there's one consolation. It'll hurt you more than it does me."

JEFF SUBSIDED, muttering, knowing it to be the truth. Well, it had been a big enough day, anyway—with Dave Macy coming in the way he had, and everything. Hank Measen slapped on a heavy, steaming cloth, and Jeff gritted his teeth and lay back.

Within a couple of days, another phenomenon of end of steel was taking place. The line was pushing forward steadily, well on to the Barrier, and it was a long way from Lumpjaw—too far to make the town a headquarters any longer. So headquarters, the town of end of steel, which had known many names, was moving again.

It had happened before, would happen again before the spur was finished. The setting up of a new town, almost overnight, as temporary headquarters for the construction crew, and, no less so, for the army of hangers-on which always accompanied such a crew.

There were two ways of building a railroad. One was to let out contracts to private individuals, all along the proposed right of way, and these in turn would hire crews, set up more or less permanent camps, and complete a section of grade, taking months, perhaps years, in the process. But once one section was finished, most of the others would be ready as well. After which the track-laying crew could come along, working without a pause, and the line would be finished in a hurry. That, all in all, was probably the best way of doing it.

But the Northern was not building the spur according to such a plan. Garth Hamby had commented on it profanely, to Jeff. That had been the way he favored, but there were other directors and stockholders with a vote, and there was politics in the building of a railroad, as well as in anything else. He had been overridden as to method. They had been persuaded to adopt the method of building the whole thing as they went along, on the theory that it would be faster, that there had been no time to let contracts and set up camps. So far, it hadn't proved out that way at all, but since that was the way it was being done, there was nothing to do but to go ahead.

So the setting up of a new town, where none had been before, keeping it up for a few weeks, then moving it ahead again as though it had been a stray road-scraper, was part of a normal routine. Sometimes part of the town remained behind, sometimes there was only the scar to mark the place where the caravan had camped.

Most of the buildings in use were so constructed that they could be knocked down or assembled again in a few hours, with entire walls in sections. These would be loaded on to flat cars, reassembled at the new site. Besides bunk houses, cook shacks and horse barns, there was, as Hank Measen put it, mule barns, saloons, a couple of stores, a restaurant or so, a newspaper office and sundry other enterprises, including a few private houses. And always the movable post office in the caboose, presided over, until the last couple of days, by Nora McQuade.

JEFF'S LEG was as good as ever again, thanks to Hank Measen's ministrations, but Nora had not returned, and end of steel seemed woefully empty and deserted, despite its teeming streets. Jeff returned to it at dusk, after a trip to Lumpjaw to superintend the moving of the town. Lumpjaw's brief heyday of glory was past, leaving it to stagnate again like a backwater which had once been swept by flood.

In the new town was turmoil, with the currents of life running red and strong. Jeff sauntered down its main street, marveling a little at the mushroom growth. Grass still grew in the streets, but that which had been windswept and untrammeled with the dawn was fast being beaten into the dust by hoofs and hob-nailed boots.

Here were five saloons already doing business, with a sixth in process of erection. Standing on a ladder, a sign painter was giving the finishing touches to a big new sign, and with the gesture, giving a name to the new town as well. Jeff sur-

veyed it in silent admiration for a moment:

Roam Saloon

Big Mike Martinez, who had run the Red Dog in Lumpjaw, came to the door to survey the sign as well. Pride dwelt in his eyes at the sight, he hailed Jeff genially.

"It's good, eh?" he chuckled. "All roads, they lead here, eh?"

"Sure," Jeff agreed gravely. "Roam is a mighty good name for this town. Fits what I feel like doing, when I look at it."

Big Mike nodded, pleased.

"Me, I was born in Rome," he confided. "And always I remember it. I would not trade it for this country, non, non. Here, there is the open and the devil, and the chance to make the money. But I theenk of the old place, and then it come to me, why not a Rome here, too." He squinted anxiously again. "It is spelled right, eh? I have not the so mooch education."

"Spelled just fine," Jeff assured him. "We haven't got the seven hills here, but there's plenty not far beyond, and we've lots of hillbillies." He paused, frowning at a saloon across the way and a block on down the street, designated as the Hellgate. "Say, what's going on down there?"

Big Mike frowned at it as well, concern etching his face.

"I weesh I knew," he sighed. "But everybody goes there tonight, the way it looks. Here I have the fine, beeg place, the bottles on the shelves, the bar ready, and not a man in it. Yet down there they go like the flies to honey. It is the devil."

Jeff shot a sharp glance, turned as a roar of song came from the Hellgate.

"Maybe you're right at that," he said. "I think I'll have a look. The devil," he added softly to himself. "It would be about time for LeGrande to be putting in his paw again."

CHAPTER IX

Fiddler Nero

THE HELLGATE was striving to live up to its name. It looked big, from the outside; from the inside, it seemed bigger still, and tonight it was thronged to the doors.

The walls were of rough boards, set up in big sections, with cracks and knot holes affording ample ventilation. A sectional roof had been set upon these without loss of time. Two or three side rooms had been added, and a big bar ran entirely down one side of the long room, with gaming tables on the opposite side. Hanging lamps shed light over the rough scene.

All of this cost money, even though the saloon raked it in, hand over fist. But tonight, though the Hellgate was doing a rushing business, it was not raking in the money, at least not over the bar. At the gaming tables plenty was being lost, but Jeff saw that men were crowding up to the bar and drinking copiously, without the usual formality of paying for their potations.

He edged through the crowd, toward the bar. It looked as if all of the town, including his own crew, had tried to wedge themselves into this one saloon tonight. And most of them were already well along on the road to being drunk. As he reached the bar, one of the bartenders let loose a stentorian roar.

"Come right along, friends. Drink yore fill. It's all on the house tonight."

So that was it. A glass was shoved toward him, and Jeff tasted it lightly, grimacing. He had run into some strong liquor here and there, appropriately dubbed as nose paint, rot gut and other dangerous things, but compared to others, this was liquid lightning. A glassful of it, he figured, would burn the paint off a wooden Indian. It was fearfully potent, with the kick of a mule.

And not everybody was drinking, as a quick survey showed. Everybody was hilarious, giving the appearance of enjoying the celebration and hav-

ing a grand time. But the usual crowd of hangers-on, men hired solely to put a stop to the turning of the railroad's wheels, these were leaving the liquor severely alone. Only the crew from the spur was drinking.

Jeff placed a hand on the bar, vaulted to the top. The eyes of the nearest bartender narrowed until they seemed to pinch a nose already crowded, and he started forward with a bung-stop. Jeff kicked him expertly in the chest with the flat of his foot, sending him sprawling down behind the bar, and he dropped one hand warningly toward his holstered gun, so that the other barflies hesitated. Jeff lifted his voice.

"That'll be enough bug-juice for tonight, boys. Enough's plenty, and a dose of this stuff would make a jackrabbit chase a grizzly bear. You boys all know what we're in this country for—to build a railroad. You know who is here to try and stop us from building it, too. Well, are we going to let them stop us?"

There was an answering roar of denial. Drunk or sober, the spur crew was solidly behind its new boss.

"They ain't nothin' goin' tuh stop us," one answered, clutching unsteadily at a table to save himself from falling.

"Not if you keep working, there isn't," Jeff agreed. "But this poison they're feeding you will stop us. Ordinary liquor takes you about a day to sober up. Drink a little more of this and you won't be able to work for a week. These free drinks are just to wreck the railroad. Get on home and to bed. Sober up. I expect you to be working in the morning, ot nursing a case of DT's."

SILENCE had fallen as he spoke. Most of them were drunk, but not yet too drunk to understand. Whether they would respond or not, he was not sure. Liquor like that was only a low-grade poison, but it could have sudden and devastating effects.

There was a momentary hesitation. Then one man shouldered forward, his face sullen. He was a big man—fully as tall and wide as Jeff himself, with a dark, rather sullen face, and he had had more drinks than was good for him. Now he waved his arms.

"We work for you, we build the railroad," he yelled. "That all right. But coom night, we drink-a da liquor, and we drink all-a we want to. We not get good whiskey free ver' often. Now, we drink-a all we like."

To his relief, Jeff saw that the rest of the crew was merely watching. They did not yell approval at this sentiment or give denial to it. He stepped down from the bar, toward the rebel.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Nero. I play-a da fiddle."

"There would be a Nero to fiddle in Rome," Jeff nodded. "But you're going back to camp and get to bed. Pronto."

"I not go." Nero shook his head. "We all stay-a and have some more da drinks."

Still there was no movement from the rest of the watchful crew. Two out of every three were Irishmen, but the rest, in the crew's parlance, were Wops—hard workers, generally amiable, well enough liked by the majority of the crew. But perhaps on account of that fact, they were slow in following Nero's lead tonight.

Nero started to push past Jeff toward the bar. As the trouble-shooter still barred his way, he suddenly went berserk. Knowing the sort of liquor he had been imbibing, Jeff wasn't surprised. Nero swung a heavy fist wildly, was rocked back on his heels by Jeff's in turn, then, swaying wildly, striving to steady himself, his hand fixed on the back of a chair, and he brought it up, swinging murderously.

Jeff launched himself, coming in under the swing, his fist found its mark again, and Nero crashed like a falling oak, lying with arms widespread. A growl went up from somewhere, but there was a cheer from the railroaders nearest at hand.

"Sure, Jeff, and yez haven't forgotten how to foight yet, begorry."

"Pack him home and put him to bed," Jeff instructed. "And the rest of you do the same. Get going."

They were with him, to a man.

While the barflies watched, sullen but knowing better than to interfere with the crowd in such a mood, they picked Nero up and filed out with him. Jeff watched them go. It had turned out a little better than he had hoped for. If they had been a little drunker, or something had gone amiss, there could have been plenty of trouble.

He waited until the last crew member was outside, turned to follow. Then he was aware that a door to one of the side rooms had been jerked suddenly open, and he half spun toward it, his hand dropping again toward his holstered gun. Then he checked the motion at the halfway mark, for, just inside the room, was LeGrande—eyeing him over a leveled pistol, finger twitching on the trigger.

"Step inside," LeGrande invited. "We're going to have a little talk before I kill you. And keep your hands away from your gun."

Someone kicked the door shut behind him as Jeff obeyed.

CHAPTER X

Hellgate Canyon

LEGRANDE stood for a moment, his yellow hair seeming to shine under the glow of the coal-oil lamp on a table behind, eyes as cold as the steel in his hand. Jeff made his voice even with an effort.

"I was figuring you must own this place, LeGrande, everything considered."

LeGrande nodded.

"It's mine, all right. I figured I'd been in hiding long enough. So I came back."

"And figured to have my men turn up too dead drunk to do any work for a week."

"That was an idea. Too bad you spoiled it, especially after they'd wasted so much whiskey. However, even if you do go ahead for a while, I'm not worried. I've got you licked —even if I let you live to keep on building track."

"So you're aiming to let me live, eh?"

"I'm considering it. You're just a bit too popular to kill, if I don't have to. And, like I said, I don't find it so necessary now. Not if you'll use a bit of common sense. Still wanting to see me hung?"

"It would give me a lot of pleasure, that I'll have to admit."

LeGrande's smile was wintry.

"I've no doubt. But you've one choice. Forget about me, and I'll let you walk out of this room. If you still insist on trying to hang me as a public show—well, I'll take the easier way out, and you'll go out feet first."

He wasn't bluffing. Jeff knew that. He could agree, or LeGrande would pull the trigger.

"Suppose I let you stay. You'll be none too popular with some of the folks."

"I'll risk that end of it. And it's up to you. Frankly, I'd just as soon kill you as not."

Jeff shrugged.

"I'll forget the hanging end of it—for the present, at least. Though they say that if a man's born to die in a noose, he will."

"I'll risk that, too. As I say, I don't care what you do or how much track you get laid. I've got you licked, no matter what you do. All right, there's the door."

JEFF turned, stumbled out into the night, more shaken than he liked to think about. For he knew again that LeGrande hadn't been bluffing.

This, then, was Roam—an empty and lonely place tonight, for all the teeming throng along its still grassy streets. There were cowboys from the Barrier and other neighboring ranches, a scattering of prospectors and saddle-bums come to inspect the new town, painted women, gamblers, riffraff from three or four states. Once he would have been at least mildly interested. Now it bored him.

Jeff considered this phenomenon soberly. He had never been lonely before—not up till the last two or three days. But since Nora had left, to nurse Dave Macy on his way to the hospital—

But with Nora gone, there was another reason for getting away. Though, mindful of LeGrande's

threat, he had a double reason for wanting to explore those hills of Hellgate which now lay so close ahead. For it was up in there, he knew with unalterable certainty, that the issue would be finally decided.

LeGrande was showing himself openly the next morning, quite as though nothing had happened back in Lumpjaw. And nothing was happening here. That was due partly to the aplomb, the cool nerve of the gambler, partly because the others were leaving the handling of the man up to Jeff. If he took a hand, his own crew would back him. If he didn't, neither would they. LeGrande was too dangerous a man to fool with.

Ignoring him, Jeff saddled one of the extra string of horses he had on hand and headed for the hills. They looked to be right at hand, but it was quite a ride before he would be in them. There was one striking feature of landscape here; the foothills seemed to end some distance before the bigger mountans were reached, leaving a stretch of prairie in between, so that the Hellgate arose like a sudden, mighty barrier out of the flat country.

A thin line of stakes, weathered now and with some of their number missing, marked the final survey for the right of way, leading into these hills. From off some distance, it looked as though they ran up against a barrier which would prove insurmountable, but as he came closer, Jeff saw that here was an opening, growing to a mighty canyon, its rocky walls towering sheer for nearly a thousand feet on either side, the total width of the opening not more than fifty yards across.

A scattering of trees and brush marked the canyon floor and helped to hide the opening from a short distance away.

EVEN at the mouth of the canyon, one thing was swiftly apparent. This brush and timber did not run back inside for more than a few hundred yards before it grew more scrubby and then almost vanished.

"No sunshine, back in here," Jeff nodded to himself. "Or mighty little, that ever gets down between such hills as these."

And trees had to have sunshine. Those at the entrance could obtain it from the side. Farther back, there was none to come except from overhead, and that would be scanty even at mid-day.

He was a little awed at the thought of a railroad, winding back into the mountans along such a canyon floor as this. Yet, so far, it was a good, level and a thoroughly passable route; and since the surveyors had gone this way, it must be practicable on through the hills.

Part of the width of the canyon floor was taken up by a creek which wound and twisted its way along. It was at low-water stage now, but there were some nice looking pools and riffles where trout should lurk. Jeff made the mental reservation to wet a line when it came time to eat.

Here the canyon floor was fairly smooth, and the business of building a grade and laying track wouldn't be difficult. He rode on, deeper into the hills, marveling at this canyon. It was straight enough along with all the rest for a good grade.

He had followed it for nearly two miles before it branched. For all of that distance it varied little in width. Then a branch showed, allowing another stream, nearly dry now, to come down from the northeast, picking its way out of a tangle of brush and boulders which clogged the whole floor of this branch canyon. The main canyon of the Hellgate, and the line of stakes, continued on northwest.

From here on the canyon was gradually growing wider, and it grew rougher as well as trees and brush began to stud it again. Boulders, some of them as big as good-sized rooms, would hinder work; shoulders of the canyon, at too abrupt turns, would have to be blasted out of the way before a train could run. Now it was coming to be more of a valley, and the good going was abruptly left behind.

Here was a hill of no mean propor-

tions which would have to be tunneled through, and on ahead would be more of the same, with great fills, deep cuts and high bridges. This was on the other side of the divide now.

Back in here, too, was country where, with winter snows to hamper and bitter cold striking down, men could strike crippling blows in a variety of ways. Yes, getting through here on time promised to be as big a fight as any man could ask for.

"If we can keep going, without any setbacks, we'll make it, all right," Jeff decided. "As to the setbacks—we'll have to lick 'em as they come."

HE STARED down at a patch of densely wooded slopes spread out below, in striking contrast to the sunless canyons behind. It was a right nice country, but still an unpeopled wilderness.

Here was another stream, and he caught his dinner from a single pool, fried his trout and ate it. This was more like the lazy, pleasant life on a big ranch, where a man could get out alone, unbothered by a constant crowd all around him. For a moment, nostalgia for the old life filled him. Then he smiled and tightened his saddle girth again.

"Reckon, for choice, I'd keep right on with this," he decided. "I kind of like a good fight—and this will be plenty good." In the back of his mind, more potent than all the rest, was the face of Nora McQuade.

"Guess I'll swing off that way, circle around, and see if I can work my way back down that little side-canyon I saw," he decided. "That'll give me a pretty good idea of this whole country."

He urged his cayuse along, skirting now a deep coulee, with a narrow trail along the edge of it. Almost hazily there came the bark of a rifle, from somewhere close at hand yet hidden by trees and rocks.

From the wildly agonized jump of his horse, Jeff knew that it had been hit, just as he knew that the bullet had been aimed for himself. Not that the error was going to make much difference in the long run. For in that first wild jump, his horse had gone off the trail, taking him along. With the coulee bottom some fifty feet below, boulder-strewn.

CHAPTER XI

Where the Heart Is

TO KICK his feet free of the stirrups was instinctive in time of crisis. But parting from a tumbling horse on the downward plunge was something else again. As they struck, halfway down the slope, Jeff flung himself off. His horse was sliding, coming to a stop a few feet farther down.

Still sliding, Jeff brought up in a small cloud of dust and rasping small stones, his head dizzy, one hip sore where he had struck and slid. But a brief inspection told him that he wasn't much hurt.

The shot had caught him by surprise, which confirmed his theory that trouble waited here in the Hellgate country. He settled himself behind a boulder, drew his gun, and waited. The odds were strong that whoever had fired that shot would be coming along, presently, to check up on how much damage it had done.

This, he figured, was some more of LeGrande's work. There might be an armed truce between them in town, but if the gambler could get him killed out here in the hills, Jeff knew that it would take a big load off LeGrande's mind.

Jeff was under no delusions as to why LeGrande had spared his life back in the saloon the other night. He would much have preferred to pull trigger and have it over with, but to murder a man in cold blood, especially such a man as Jeff Boone, might bring repercussions. Especially among a crowd which remembered that dynamite car back at Lumpjaw.

But this ambush artist was certainly taking his time in looking around and checking on the effectiveness of that shot. Jeff stirred impatiently. He had been crouched behind that stone for at least an hour, and nothing had stirred at all.

There would be some risk in moving, while daylight lasted, but he

preferred that to waiting there another three or four hours under such conditions.

MOVING warily, he left the coulee, headed back the way he had come, since it would save a few miles. Still nothing stirred.

Footsore and weary, he came into Roam at midnight. The town was quiet, now, since working men had to sleep, and there was little except the railroad for it to draw from.

On the street, the next morning, Jeff came face to face with LeGrande. There was no change in the gambler's face at sight of him. If he was surprised to see him, he knew how to hide it. Hank Measen approached, a worried look on his face.

"If it ain't one thing, it's two of 'em," he said, with a jerk of his head toward LeGrande's vanishing back.

"What's the trouble now?" Jeff asked.

Hank waved a fistful of papers.

"Supplies," he explained. "We've got plenty of steel rails here, for a wonder, but they ain't doing us a bit of good. We're just about scrapin' bottom on spikes and tie plates. Them little doodads that yuh spike the rails fast to the ties with. There's a carload of them, but they're on a side-track, back at Tongren, and I can't seem to get no action on 'em. I've kept the wires hot for a week, and got a barrel of promises, but nary a spike."

"Tongren," Jeff repeated thoughtfully. "Isn't that where Macy's at the hospital?"

"That's the place. And that being so, I've sent him a couple of wires, askin' him to see that that car got rollin'. Which he said he'd sure do, but they ain't here."

"In which case," decided, "I think I'll go get them myself."

"And that's a danged good idea," Hank applauded. "If we don't have 'em by tomorrow, we can't lay any more track. And there's plenty reason for keepin' it stretchin'."

Ten minutes later, Jeff found Dinny McQuade, busy with oil can and wiping rag, going over his engine with as much solicitous care as if it had been his personal property. Steam was already up, and Casey Ryan was busy in the cab.

"I think you need a change today, Dinny," Jeff greeted him. "So we're runnin' back to Tongren to pick up a car of spikes and tie-plates."

McQuade's face brightened.

"Sure, and we can pick up Nora, too, while we're there," he declared. "She'll be ready and anxious to come home. I'll hook onto a caboose and be ready in two jerks."

"And the way he jerks when he starts a train, 'tis a wonder we have any rollin' stock left," Casey Ryan added with a grin, and ducked the oil can.

Nora! Jeff hadn't considered the possibility of her returning with them, but the prospect was not displeasing. He climbed into the cab and settled himself. The engineer raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Ain't yez aimin' to ride in your private car?" he asked. "And thravel in state?"

"I'd rather travel in good company," Jeff assured him. "I'm ready to roll when you are."

"Then we roll," Dinny agreed. "And just betwane you and me and the fire-box, Casey bein' too dumb for anything to be betwane, sure and this engine rides a lot sweeter than to be jouncin' around in a caboose—especial on such a track as this. It has a rockin' chair motion, but there's no carpet under."

HE HADN'T exaggerated that any, as Jeff already knew. The track was solid enough to run a train over, but it was far from being a finished product. Once they had left Lumpjaw behind and were heading on south, he had an opportunity to look over a lot of the track which was new to him.

They rumbled across bridges, through shallow cuts and out over fills. Here was one long, deep fill, then a high bridge fully four hundred feet long, spanning a deep coulee. Dinny McQuade waved a greasy thumb downward.

"Wan engine and part of a train wint off there, before ye took over," he explained. "It was the matter of a misplaced rail in the dark."

"It makes a nice job that you have, Dinny, never knowing what you may be coming to."

"If he did know for sure, either way, sure and he'd quit his job as bein' too tame," Casey volunteered.

Dinny nodded.

"And for wance, he's almost half right," he conceded. "I like a mild spice of excitement now and ag'in. Somethin' to add interest to the job. Though the hottest job I iver had, as I remember now, was takin' a train about a dozen miles through a forest fire, blazin' close on each side, and travelin' just about as fast as we could roll, too. But we got through," he added pridefully.

That, Jeff knew, was a tradition with Dinny, in fact with all the workmen of the Northern—to go through. With a crew like that behind you, you couldn't help but win.

They rolled into Tongren a little before noon, which, as Dinny pointed out, was making a mighty good run —a average of better than twenty miles an hour. Tongren itself had aspirations toward being a city, and it boasted a hospital, three churches and a real school system, as well as a few green lawns and the beginning of a water works. Coal mines, especially since the coming of the railroad, were contributing to its prosperity, here among fair-sized hills. Dinny jerked a thumb disgustedly.

"Sure, and they're hopin' for a scenic city, and boostin' their coal at wan and the same toime," he said ironically. "And a city they may have, and the coal they do have, but did ye iver see a coal camp that was annything but a coal camp?"

With which pronouncement, the two of them hunted up the hospital. There was a pleasant sunny room, and Jeff halted in the doorway as Dinny barged on in.

DAVE MACY was sitting up in a chair, looking about as good as ever, but he was not alone. Nora McQuade was there, and another girl as well—a girl so strikingly handsome and so much like her brother that there could be no question as to their relationship.

Nora was on her feet with a little cry and had her father in her arms, and Macy came to his feet as well with hand outstretched.

"Well, well, talk about your pleasant surprises!" he exclaimed. "How are you, Jeff? Kathleen, I want you to meet the man who saved my worthless neck for me—Jeff Boone. Jeff, this is my little sister Katie."

Jeff shook hands with her, aware of something fine and strong in her which seemed to be missing from her brother's make-up.

'I'll always be grateful to you for that, Mr. Boone," she assured him. And he knew the words meant all they said. Then Nora was giving him her hand, still exclaiming.

"Dad tells me you're going back today, so I'm going with you," she declared. "I've been getting terribly anxious to see how everything is going. Dave is getting along fine, and besides, Kathleen is here to look after him now. And this town is so citified that I don't feel at home here at all."

Dinny McQuade winked.

"And that's for yez, Macy," he nodded. "If ye iver marry her, sure and ye'll have to tame and civilize her. Put her in a big house in a big city loike Denver, and she'd be a bird in a gilded cage. 'Tis in a place loike Lumpjaw or Roam that she feels at home."

"Just so that she has a railroad to look after, she'll feel at home anywhere," Macy predicted, but Jeff had observed the sudden shadow on Nora's face at her father's words, and her own glance out at the confines of this little city.

CHAPTER XII

Choked-Off Confession

DAVE MACY was cheerful and well on the road to recovery. A couple of hours later, with the carload of needed supplies

attached, the train was on its way back again, Nora and Jeff riding in the caboose.

That car of steel represented a real triumph. Questions concerning it had brought no results. No one seemed to know anything about it, though some expressed surprise that it hadn't arrived at end of steel long ago.

On the part of some, Jeff put this down to plain dumbness or lack of knowledge. Others, he was equally sure, spoke with tongue in cheek. But there was a conspiracy to keep the car here, out of the way, and that, he had a strong hunch, went right back to Macy.

So to Macy he said nothing; he had spent a busy half-hour in checking the cars which were stretched along a mile of side-track. On a seldom-used spur which had run to a coal mine no longer operating, and hidden by a low hill and brush, on rusty tracks, he had found the car, and Dinny McQuade had promptly done the rest.

"The dirthy spalpeens," McQuade had growled. "There's far too much of that sort of thing going on. 'Tis too bad that Macy wasn't able to look about himself."

It was plain that neither Dinny nor Nora had any suspicion of the superintendent's double-crossing. Nora looked out of the window at the flat country as they rolled across it, her face alight.

"We're going home again," she said, a little lilt to her voice. "And I'm anxious to get there."

"No more anxious that we are to have you there, Nora," Jeff assured her. "It makes all the difference in the world how the railroad goes, whether you're around or not."

"You're making fun of me now, Jeff Boone," she said serenely. "But I'm that happy to be going home that I don't care."

"I'm not making fun, Nora darlin'." Jeff assured her, and at something in his tone she looked up quickly, then held her gaze steadfastly out the window again. "Just your presence is an inspiration to everybody."

"Sure, and you have a nice way of saying things, Jeff" she said lightly. "Have you even been to Ireland?"

"The closest was when I met you."

"One finds it hard to believe. 'Twould almost seem you had kissed the Blarney Stone—now what are we stopping for?"

JEFF THRUST his head out of the window to squint ahead, then was quickly at the door and off as the little train jolted to a sudden stop. Up ahead rose a curling column of smoke. Nora was at his heels as he ran past the car and beside the engine. Dinny McQuade and Casey Ryan alike had jumped down and were standing now at the edge of the long, high trestle, scowling.

Up ahead smoke was billowing and below, around some of the pilings, driven deep into the ground and reaching up to hold the bridge, they could see the red of hungry licking flames.

The flames had not yet reached up to the ties or the track itself, but a glance was sufficient to show that the fire had already gained considerable headway. Dinny McQuade was scowling anxiously.

"Somebody aimed to delay us from gettin' there with this car of steel for another week," he growled. "But I'm takin' her across, Jeff. Do you and Nora wait here, then ye'll have toime enough to come over on foot behind us."

"You think it will still stand, Dinny?"

"It's got to stand," the engineer grated. "Sure, and we have to have that steel."

Jeff swung onto the engine behind him, his face grim. From the looks of things, it would be touch and go whether the trestle was already so weakened that the weight of the train would send it crashing to destruction or not. This fire had been planned to stop them—no question of that.

"No need for ye to risk your neck

along with us," Dinny said roughly. "Twill take only a minute to walk, after."

"Get going," Jeff ordered. "Who's trouble-shooter on this line, anyway?" Then he stopped in dismay, for Nora, still at their heels, had swung onto the engine as well. Dinny scowled ferociously.

"Nora, girl, get ye off again," he ordered. "Sure and three fools are plenty for one time."

Nora smiled serenely.

"I'm as much a railroader as you are, Dad, and besides, you're wasting time," she reminded him. "Every second you stop to argue makes it that much less certain of going across."

Dinny scowled for a moment longer, then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he turned to his task.

"Just as stubborn as your mother, Lord rest her soul," he grunted.

CASEY Ryan's face was set, but he was shoveling the coal in. Dinny opened his throttle fast. He wasn't going to try creeping here. One thing was in their favor. They did not have a long train, though the car of steel, like the locomotive, was heavy.

They were out on the trestle then, wheels singing, the ground looking to be a long way below. Suddenly smoke was billowing around them, a hot breath swept up, flames licked now at the sides of the trestle itself. For an instant they all held their breath as an ominous crack sounded, sharp and clear above the noise of the train and the crackle of the flames. The locomotive weaved a little, like a drunken man, but it kept going. A moment later engine, car and caboose were safely past the danger point.

Nora drew a deep breath, then caught it again as, leaning out, Jeff dropped suddenly off the train and, with hardly a pause, was on down over the side of the trestle. They were close to the end of it now, and the ground was not so dizzyingly far below. But even as his head and shoulders vanished over the side, there came the sharp, ominous crack of a gun. A moment later, as the train ground to a stop safely on the far side, Nora too was off and running back.

Jeff's face was grim as he let go and dropped, then jumped on down with hardly a pause at the edge of the bridge. It was another ten feet to the ground below here, and the slope was fairly sharp, but that didn't worry him.

He had been watching, as the train started forward, had glimpsed something which the others had not seen—a face peering anxiously out at them from under the bridge here, being jerked back in like a turtle vanishing into its shell. Now, as he hit the ground, he spun half around, to have a gun discharged point blank into his face.

But Jeff had been expecting something of that sort, too. A man who would do this sort of dirty work, like firing a bridge, would shoot like a cornered rat when he was trapped. Probably he had counted on at least another hour before the train came along, ample time for a part of the bridge to collapse and for himself to be safely away from the scene.

Allowing himself to slide a little as he struck the steep slope, Jeff utilized that to swing himself aside, even as his eyes picked out the crouching form of the firebug. The bullet, fired hastily, missed him by a foot, and he didn't wait for a second shot. His hands reached out, closed, and he twisted the gun away. It dropped, slid on down the hill and vanished in the fire, more than thirty feet below them.

The heat of the fire was getting unpleasant, back in here with the rising slope of the ground on one side and the ties and track overhead to reflect it back at them, but for the moment neither of them was giving much thought to that. The firebug was a big man, and he was fighting with the strength of desperation.

Even so, he was no match for Jeff. A moment more and he had the man down, was kneeling on him, hands on his throat.

"You will, will you?" he growled. "Well, hombre, you'll do several things that you maybe didn't count on—and the first one is some talking. Who paid you for setting that fire? Come on, speak up quick!"

He released his pressure a little, suddenly aware that the other man's eyes were popping, that he was wheezing with difficulty, and would be quite unable to talk while that pressure was on his windpipe. He glared up at Jeff a moment, swallowed uncertainly, then cursed.

"Be darned if I talk," he gasped.

"You'll be darned if you don't, make no mistake about that," Jeff warned, and, by way of emphasis, knocked his head up and down on the ground a couple of times. "Either talk, now, or I'll get a rope and hang you like you deserve—and I'll hang you from the ties, right over the fire you set. Who hired you?"

The dire threat was effective, and a glance into the implacable face above him convinced that firebug that it was no idle threat.

"I'll talk," he agreed. "Only for God's sake don't do that. It was the supe, Ma—"

Jeff was aware of running feet, a swish of skirts, and the sudden appearance of Nora McQuade, her own face white with anxiety. With a sudden vicious jerk he lifted his victim's head again and thumped it down with sufficient force to knock him cold and limp.

CHAPTER XIII

Slick-Spoken Gent

JEFF HAD acted swiftly enough so that Nora hadn't heard that indictment of Dave Macy, Superintendent of the Northern. He had done that for her, though he hardly knew why. A cold rage burned in him at thought of Macy's deliberate treachery, sending a man to do this sort of thing.

Probably Macy had figured that the bridge would be destroyed before they reached it—he had tried hard, Jeff remembered, to get them to stay longer in town—and, assuming that the bridge was gone, there would be no danger for Dinny McQuade, or for Nora.

But he had been willing to run that risk.

The firebug must have been camped somewhere near, and probably he called up for orders at stated intervals, tapping the telegraph wire, perhaps untwisting it at a cut so that the message could not go the other way to end of steel. Hank had complained more than once of silent wires for a time.

Looking up, Jeff could see where two or three of the big piles, seriously weakened by fire, had buckled under the weight of the train, allowing one side of the trestle to list a little, but it had held enough for them to get on across. Two tiers of piles were blazing fiercely, a third row had a pile of brush stacked around the foot, and Casey Ryan was running down and scattering this now, then, with his shovel, busily throwing dirt to smother the flames.

That would save that particular row of piles, if they could confine the fire to the two tiers which were already doomed. If that was done, it would not take long to repair the bridge—a good day's work with pile driver and bridge crew, instead of ten days or so if the whole long bridge went.

But confining the fire to its present proportions would not be easy. Down in the bottom of the gorge was a tiny trickle of a stream, but there was not enough water to do any good, and it was too far away and hard to get at in any case. Dirt, such as Casey Ryan was using, was effective, but —only up to the height to which a man could throw it. And some of those tiers were blazing for almost a hundred feet!

They had to smother the blaze, though, or else it would keep spreading. Jeff's eyes ranged ahead. Less than a hundred feet beyond the end of the trestle was a deep cut, and somebody working there, motivated either by the need for haste or doing it with careful deliberateness, had done a poor job.

On one side, instead of being cut upward at a gradual slope, back from

the track, the cut was almost straight up and down, and near the top it had bulged a little, so that it made an overhang now, in imminent danger of falling. That could have caused a few hours more delay and trouble, as it had probably been planned to do. But now it might be turned to advantage.

"Dinny," Jeff yelled, pointing. "Get the caboose under that, quick. We can use that dirt."

ALREADY HE had grabbed a shovel and was racing down the track, climbing up the bank. The engineer stared for a moment, dubiously, as something of what Jeff had in mind came to him. Then, shaking his head, he climbed back into his cab and moved the train up as instructed.

"Sure, and it can't be much worse than it is, that's one comfort," he muttered to himself, and watched as Jeff went to work.

It was a drop of several feet to the roof of the caboose, but not too long a fall. Using his shovel where the overhang had started to crack loose and throwing his weight on it was enough. A minute of this, and half a dozen tons of earth slipped and slid, part of it falling beside the cars, but well over half of it dropping onto the roof of the caboose.

With a sigh of relief, Jeff saw that it had spread out enough in falling so that the roof, never built with any such thing in mind, had stood the strain without collapsing. He slid to the bottom of the cut, fiercely attacking the dirt crowded around the wheels of the caboose. A moment later, Dinny McQuade was beside him with another shovel.

"Reckon we can pull out of it now." McQuade straightened, staring at the flaming trestle with apprehension. "Do yez mane to back out on that and heave the dirt off on the fire?'

"That's the idea," Jeff agreed cheerfully. "You back the train and I'll throw the dirt off."

Dinny McQuade nodded, speechless. Nora was watching, wide-eyed. Casey Ryan was still heaving dirt from below, and he had pretty well smothered the fire where it sought to spread down there. But it had to be checked up above to do any good.

And moving a train back onto that weakened trestle—it seemed like tempting fate. If he went a bit too far, McQuade knew what would happen. The trestle would buckle in earnest, and if he was lucky, stopping and then opening the throttle to go forward again, he might jerk the train off before the weight of the caboose pulled down the heavier engine and car of steel. If he wasn't lucky, there would be a bad mess.

DINNY MCQUADE had a sure hand on the throttle, and for this Jeff was thankful. They were backing now steadily; he felt the movement stop as there was an ominous groan from the timbers, then he was tumbling that loosely piled dirt off and onto the flames as fast as he could heave with the shovel.

Flames had been shooting up above the top of the bridge, the ties on top, for a distance of several feet, were a mass of fire now as well. The spraying dirt quickly smothered the fire on the top and sides of these, and part of it was tumbling through the cracks between, raining down on the burning trestle timbers. But even so, it was not enough to seriously impede the flames along those big piles.

Jeff had known that would be the case, but they were winning the fight, for all that. The flames had been smothered at the top enough to keep them from eating along the ties in both directions, and hindered enough so that the two tiers of piles blazed more sullenly now. Those were doomed, but if they could stop the fire from eating in either direction, the big battle would be won.

His dirt was unloaded, and Dinny McQuade ran the train ahead thankfully, out of possible danger. Casey Ryan viewed the whole thing dubiously, for, with the rain of dirt ended, the timbers were starting to burn with renewed fierceness.

"Looks loike the fire'd spread in spite of us," he sighed. "The best I can do with me shovel is to heave dirt about twinty feet in the air."

Jeff raced for the caboose, returned, swinging a big axe in either hand. One he thrust at Casey.

"You might chop away a few ties up above," he suggested. "And stop it there."

With the other axe, he was down under again. Several of the big piles had been eaten nearly in two by the fire, some halfway up, but were still burning fiercely toward the top, and that was where the danger lay. Here at the bottom, though badly burned, the fire had been smothered by the dirt which Casey had shoveled. Jeff attacked the first one at the side, swinging hard.

Nora, watching, marveled at the precision of his strokes. The axe was sharp, and it bit deep, every stroke counting. Smoke and burning debris rattled down around him, but Jeff was ignoring the swirling clouds and the stinging particles alike, raining blows with steady toll on the big pile.

"Where did you ever learn to use an axe that way, Jeff?" Nora demanded.

"I tried being a lumberman one winter," Jeff explained. "I didn't like it—but I learned to use an axe. Stand away," he warned, and leaped back.

Cut through at the bottom, and burned nearly two-thirds through near the top, the pile wavered, cracked off near the top, and fell with a wild swish of flame, rolling to lodge partially against the next tier farther down the slope. Jeff ran up, sank his axe in the smoking butt, dragged the whole out of danger, and went to attack the next pile.

It was incredible, man-killing work, that battle, with Casey Ryan chopping up above and Jeff down below, Nora and her father wielding shovels at every possible point where the flames threatened to spread. A job that flesh and blood couldn't stand for long, but within half an hour the worst of it was over, for the flames had consumed most of the two rows which they had attacked.

ANOTHER HALF-HOUR of mopping up and the fire was out. There was a gap here, but the main part of the trestle still stood, the lines of steel still bridged the blackened hole below. All four of them were begrimed, with singed eyebrows and the smell of smoke upon them, but jubilant. Casey Ryan stood back and wiped a grimy shirtsleeve across an equally grimy face.

"Sure, and I'd never have believed it could be done," he sighed. "But it was. And now, sure and we'd ought to hang that spalpeen that started it from those rails up there."

"We'll take him in to Roam," Jeff said grimly. "Can anybody send a telegram if I tap the wire here?"

"I can," Nora replied quickly.

Jeff sighed in relief. The warning about the bridge was quickly dispatched, then the train rolled on again, reaching Roam as the early dusk was settling. The firebug, tightly tied, was sullen and uncommunicative, but he had already told all that Jeff needed to know.

As the train rolled to a stop, Hank Measen came running.

"Got it, didn't yuh?" he exclaimed, seeing the car of steel. Then he stopped, eyeing the blackened crew in astonishment. "What on earth's happened?"

"A trestle was on fire," Jeff explained. "Anything wrong here?"

Hank jerked back to the present again, his face anxious.

"I was hopin' yuh'd be gettin' here. There's plenty that's wrong. A slick-spoken gent got here this afternoon, name of Calhoun, or so he claims. Says he's got a big project of some kind off a ways, and he's trying to hire our whole crew away from us—offering them wages half as high again as what we're payin'. And from the looks, they're all gettin' ready to sign on with him."

CHAPTER XIV

Nero Fiddles

"WELL, AT least they're consistent," Nora exclaimed. "They don't miss any opportunity to bother us."

"But this is danged serious, Miss Nora," Hank exclaimed. "I'm sure glad to see you back—like the roses in spring—but if they get the crew away from us—"

"They haven't got them away from us," Nora retorted. "And sure, with Jeff here, they won't."

That confidence in him was warming, and Jeff needed it; he was dog-tired, almost to the point of exhaustion, his eyebrows and the edges of his hair singed, his hands a mass of blisters from swinging the axe.

It was no coincidence, of course, that Calhoun had arrived to try and hire the crew away while he was absent himself. He turned toward the town, Hank on one side of him and Nora on the other.

"You'd better go get cleaned up and rest, Nora," Jeff advised. "You must be tired."

"And what of yourself, sir?" she demanded. "Sure, and I know I look a sight, but I'm going right along with you and maybe speak a few words myself. Some of the men might listen to me."

There was sound logic in that, for Nora had a lot of influence. The railroaders knew her and trusted her. Hank was explaining as they went along.

"Calhoun, like I say, he's that smooth-spoken that grease drips off his tongue, and he's gettin' ready to sign 'em up now. I tried to talk to some of them, but they acted like they was hypnotized. Said a man had a right to do the best he could for himself."

That was a good argument, and Jeff knew it would be hard to combat. For the Northern could offer no increase in wages. It was paying the going rates now, and could afford no more.

* * *

IN THE distance they could hear the hum of voices—the overtones of a throng of men who were plainly excited, all trying to talk at once. And then there was a sudden hush, and in place of the babel arose a sound of music—violin music, strong and sweet on the air.

It arose compellingly, drowning out the last of the voices, then softened a little, flowing along without a break. Jeff did not know the tune, but it was haunting, wistful, one to make men think of home, of things alien to this wild camp on the frontier, of memories all but forgotten.

"That's Fiddler Nero playin'," Hank Measen exclaimed.

They went quietly now, coming to the edge of the crowd but stopping a little short of its fringes. It was a big crowd, filling the darkling street from side to side, and it looked as if everybody in town, every man who worked for the railroad, was gathered there.

Off at one side an improvised desk had been set up of a packing case, and behind this was a man whom Jeff had no difficulty in picking out as Calhoun. He was tall, rather slender, quietly dressed, and there was little about him to set him apart from the ordinary run save for the benign smile on his face, though right now the smile looked a little strained and frozen. Beside him was a clerk, with some sheets of paper and pencils. Though he looked more like a gunman than a man accustomed to handling such implements.

"They was gettin' ready to sign up every man in black and white," Hank explained.

But that added ruse seemed to have struck a snag for the moment. On the opposite side of the street, standing in front of the Roam Saloon, bulking above the crowd and with fiddle tucked under a jutting chin, the bow looking almost lost in his big paw, was Nero, and he was luring music from the box which one would never have suspected of lurking in it.

Music which held the crowd as in a thrall. To the last man they had turned to listen. And hearing him play, Jeff knew one thing. The man was a master. Some whim of fate had driven him here to the rail camps, working like the others, when he might have been upon a concert stage. But such a thing had probably never occurred to him.

For minutes on end he played, without a pause in between, changing smoothly from one tune to another, some rollicking and gay, others sad and haunting. Then abruptly he lowered the fiddle from under his chin, looked out over the crowd.

"You lika my music?" he inquired.

A wave of applause went up, shouts and demands for more. Nero smiled, played another number, and lowered his instrument again.

"I lika to play," he confided. "But one t'ing, I work for da railroad. To build it—that is the beeg-a thing, yes. If you go way, mak' fools of yourself, then you not hear-a Nero play any more. Me, I stay witha da railroad, you bet."

CALHOUN STIRRED uneasily. Jeff, watching, made no move to go forward. The dusk was closing down, but it was still light enough to see quite clearly.

The crowd was uneasy at that pronouncement as well. Someone yelled out a challenge.

"Why stay here when you can get bigger wages, Nero? Come on along with the rest of us. Yuh ain't got no cause to love the railroad—not after what the boss did to yuh the other night!"

"No?" Nero seemed to stand a little taller, to lean a little toward the crowd. Something of the glow that had been in his eyes as he played was on his face now.

"For ten year," he went on clearly, "I beeg-a da man, I fight any man comes along—I lick-a dem all. I theenk I the beeg-a da man, oh yes. And then this Jeff, the beeg-a boss, he lick me. I tell-a you, he is a man. He build-a da railroad, and I work for a man!"

"That's right, Nero, tell 'em a few things," someone yelled encouragingly.

But for answer, Nero resettled the fiddle and drew the bow across the strings again. Once more there was silence, but Jeff noted that the clerk beside Calhoun had slipped away in the dusk, and the smile on Calhoun's face had faded like the day.

"He's got 'em going," Hank whispered excitedly. "Looks like yuh made a convert the other night, Jeff."

"He has the soul of an artist in that big body of his," Nora whispered. "He was drunk the other night. But tonight he's a man—and listen to him play!"

There was in it all the haunting melody of the nightingale and the thrush, the folksongs of a people and the heartbreak of disillusionment. But there was something more, swelling triumphant above it all—hope and faith and courage and the spirit to fight for these things. Men were dabbing furtively at their eyes as he played, some blinked unashamed. There was no question but that, with his music, Nero could sway a crowd.

Again he lowered the fiddle, stood for a moment looking at them, and repeated his former question softly.

"You lika my music?"

There had been a hush, following the music. Now the applause came in a solid wave. Nero did not smile.

"You stay-a here, work-a for da railroad, you hear me play," he promised. "But you go-a, you not hear me play any more."

"Bejabbers, I'm a stayin' thin, for one," a voice went up in a shout. "Ain't we here to build the railroad? And to hell with the wages, whin we can listen to music the loikes of that."

CALHOUN WAS on his feet, trying to get their attention again. For a few moments he was unable to do so, but gradually they quieted. In the soft, even flow of words, the broad smile he wore was convincing.

"Your sense of loyalty does you credit," he assured them, once he had their attention again. "There is no virtue which I admire more highly. But between this job and the one to which I call you, the benefits which will accrue to civilization, to this great West which we, as pioneers together, are opening up, there can be no question. I offer you an opportunity to do great things, to be the makers of an empire. And because the laborer is worthy of his hire, I offer you, not a pittance, but your true

worth in good hard round silver dollars—"

They were listening to him again, being swayed by him. Realizing it, Nero lifted the fiddle and resettled it under his chin, began for a third time to play. Calhoun flashed him a glance of annoyance, tried to keep on talking. But against the magic of Nero's violin he was helpless. No one was looking at him now or listening to him, and if Nero continued to play, there was no question as to who would win.

"He's got them going," Nora breathed jubilantly, and her fingers clutched Jeff's arm eagerly. "Oh, Jeff, you did a better piece of work the other night than you ever knew—"

She stopped suddenly, her face whitening in the dusk. Calhoun's voice could not cut across this flow of music, but there were other and more potent weapons. A shot rang out from somewhere at the edge of the crowd, over in the rim of darkness, and with it the music ceased abruptly.

Nero stood, a startled, bewildered look of pain on his face. The bow in his hand wavered, went lax in a crashing discord, the fiddle itself dropped at his feet and he staggered back, blood gushing from a wound near his heart.

CHAPTER XV

Noose Medicine

THERE WAS a moment of shocked silence. Then an ominous growl welled up from the crowd, a sound like the hungry growl of a wolf pack.

Someone gave a shout, and they surged forward. There was a short chase, a gasping, panting cry, and then they dragged the killer out into the open—a white-faced creature with eyes which roved desperately here and there like those of a cornered coyote seeking some way of escape. He was the clerk who had been first and last a gunman, who had been sitting beside Calhoun only a few minutes before.

"You murderin' hound," someone exclaimed venomously. "Sneakin' up and shootin' that way!"

"String him up!" someone yelled, and the cry was swiftly taken up from hundreds of throats. The captive cowered away, all the bravado of the killer gone now in a miserable panic.

The facts were swiftly established. Half a dozen men had been close enough to see the flash of the gun, had leaped after him and grabbed him before he could run far. They found the dropped gun with one freshly fired shell where he had stood. Damning evidence—all the evidence that was needed for a crowd in such a mood as this.

Nor did he attempt a denial. For the moment he seemed to be utterly speechless. There was a short delay while some of the crowd bent to look at Nero, to give a report.

"He ain't dead—yet. Looks like he soon will be, though."

It had been a deliberate, attempt at murder, to try and stop Nero's violin. It looked as though it had succeeded, but the gunman had made a ghastly mistake in his estimate of the crowd.

A shooting was nothing new, even here in the new town of Roam, or at any of the towns which marked end of steel. Scarcely a day passed in which powder smoke did not hang like a fog upon the air following some brief and turbulent quarrel, and more than once the man who survived such an affray would go scot free and unchallenged.

But such shootings were usually out in the open, before witnesses. They were the rough and ready rule of the frontier. A shooting from ambush, at an unarmed, unsuspecting man, was outside the pale, and the clerk had bungled his task badly in almost every particular. What was going to happen now to him was as certain as the climbing moon.

Jeff had watched, with white face. He turned now to Nora.

"You'd better get back to your car, Nora," he said. "This isn't going to be pretty."

Just what he had expected to see

in Nora's face Jeff wasn't quite sure. His experience with women had been a very limited thing, and though he recognized the fact that Nora was not at all in the usual category, he had somehow expected to find her a little pale and shrinking from what impended. Instead, her eyes were blazing as fiercely as his own, her cheeks flushed.

"Of course it won't be pretty, but it's what he deserves," she cried. "The cowardly beast!"

Then, like an echo to that thought, she smiled up at him.

"But it's good advice you gave me, Jeff, and I'll take it," she agreed. "If such a mob knew that a woman approved, they'd be almost too shocked to go through with it. So I'll be going back."

Jeff watched her until she was out of sight, swung back. A few men had stopped to care for Nero, but the work of the majority was going swiftly forward. Here in the low foothill country there were no trees adquate to their purpose, but a roof-beam projected out for a few feet from the peak of LeGrande's Hell-gate Saloon. It would do just as well, and already they were surging toward it, carrying their cowering captive with them; someone had tossed a rope over the beam.

There arose a short argument as to the best way to finish the job, for a hanging was new in Roam, and this had to be done right. Some were in favor of bringing a horse, seating the victim on it with the noose around his neck, and riding the cayuse out from under him. Others favored having him stand on a pack box and kicking it away, while a third school contended that it would be simpler and easier merely to hoist away on the other end of the rope and drag him off his feet, leaving him hang there until the next day.

"Naw, that ain't the right way to do it," one big man protested. "Sure he needs hangin', and that's what he's going to get. But the thing needs to be done right. Get a box so's to give him a drop and snap his neck. Me, I know how to fix the knot so it'll do it."

His counsel prevailed, and the shivering gunman was hoisted up, being so limp that he seemed unable to climb up by himself, almost past standing on his own legs. It was at this juncture that Jeff shouldered to the front.

"Wait a minute, boys," he called, and at his voice, there was sudden hush, men staring to behold his toil-worn, blackened appearance.

"There's two things you've sort of forgot about," he went on. "One is, maybe he'd like to say a few last words. If so, it's only fair to give him a chance."

"That's right," someone agreed. "Reckon he won't do no more talkin' hereafter. If yuh got anything to get off yore chest, hombre, now's the time to spill it."

Their victim glared about hopelessly, tried to speak, but seemed unable to do so.

"Maybe the other thing will help," Jeff suggested. "We haven't asked him yet why he did it. But you'll recall that he was working for that Calhoun gent, and it was Calhoun sent him away. Calhoun tell you to do the shooting, eh?"

A CHANGE seemed to come over the doomed man. His trembling knees steadied, then he straightened his shoulders and lifted his head.

"It was my idea, to stop that Nero's noise," he said. "I guess I stopped him, all right, even if I did make a mistake. But I can take my own medicine."

"That all yuh got to say?"

"That's all I've got to say. What's the sense of wastin' words?"

Heads nodded in approval. They could understand that attitude, and there was no sense in being out here all night about this job. But already a new murmur was going up as Jeff's suggestion took root in their minds.

"He was workin' for Calhoun. Where is that dirty skunk?"

Someone yelled a discovery. They had found Calhoun on the outskirts of the crowd, trying to edge away without attracting attention. He was quickly corraled, and, the first item of business having been disposed of,

became the speedy focus of angry attention.

"What'll we do with him?" was the demand. "He's the sort that hires killers to go around shooting men in the back. Nero wouldn't have been shot if it hadn't been for him."

There was a fresh, angry growl from the mob.

"String him up, too."

"Ain't room for more'n one up there," someone protested. "And we don't want to cut him down yet."

This presented a problem, for good places to throw a rope over were scarce in Roam. Someone had a new idea, quietly suggested by Jeff.

"Hell, we don't need to lynch him. We got the killer. Just ride him out of town on a rail."

The idea found instant favor. It was but the matter of moments to find a rail and to hoist their unhappy victim astraddle of it. Calhoun's silver tongue was stilled now by a clammy fear, made the more poignant by the realization that he had sadly misjudged the temper of this crowd.

The grim reality had been borne in upon him too late that murder was a bad weapon to use, especially if it was bungled. Calhoun had given the order, though he had expected his henchman to use a bit better judgment in carrying it out.

FOR A moment, the rail had satisfied the crowd. But some had been quick to think of the embellishments. Tar was not hard to find, and Casey Ryan himself sacrificed a feather pillow which he had cherished in his own bunk for many months. Suitably attired and carried high, Calhoun was ridden out of town, tipped off his perch, and told to travel fast and far, with no thought of returning. The emptying of half a hundred six-guns in the ground perilously close to his twinkling heels embellished the command with authority.

It was almost a jovial crowd which swung back after watching Calhoun vanish across the horizon. Dinny McQuade was chuckling.

"Me, I've chased jackrabbits along the track," he confided. "Get the beasties in the glare of the headlight at night, and they'll run for miles. Most generally they can outrun an engine, at that. But I ain't niver seen nobody travel the way he did."

At the outskirts again, Jeff halted them with uplifted hand.

"Boys," he said, "you've done a good job tonight—one that will help end of steel a lot. All our trouble has come from the crowd that wanted to keep us from building this railroad, and have been trying to stop us. But the two you've handled tonight have been small fry. Since a clean-up has been started, why not keep it moving?"

There was an answering roar of approval. Big Mike Martinez nodded anxiously.

"Sure theeng. What you mean for the next, eh?"

"I mean LeGrande. Do you want him in town any longer?"

"Sure, and we'll find another rail for LeGrande. We might as well make a clane-up while we're about it."

"I don't think that a rail will be necessary in this case," Jeff assured them. "We'll just pay him a little call and remind him that there are rails—and ropes—if we need to use them."

"Sure, what's the use of wastin' thim on such tripe, annyway? He has a pair of legs and can move himself out of town."

THEY arrived at the Hellgate in a clamorous mood, scarcely pausing to view the grisly adornment which swung now from the ridgepole in front. As they pushed open the door and surged through, it was evident that that grim reminder had affected even LeGrande himself. Not to mention his usual crew of hangers-on, most of whom had silently slipped away. Tonight there was no big business for his Hellgate Saloon.

He stood to watch them come in, alert and unsmiling, but dangerous as ever. His voice was unruffled.

"Well, gentlemen? What can I do for you?"

"We're making a clean-up tonight, LeGrande," Jeff explained. "So we figured it would be a shame to overlook you."

LeGrande shrugged a little.

"It all depends on the way you look at things, I suppose. What did you have in mind?"

"We had it in mind for you to travel—tonight. If you're of a mind to go by yourself, without an escort—"

Again LeGrande shrugged.

"It looks as though I should have pulled trigger the other night, Boone," he sighed. "Still, it doesn't matter. I'll go—right away. After all, it won't make any difference—now. Every dollar that the Northern spends from now on just helps to insure its bankruptcy at the proper time."

He was smiling as he paused to gather a few items together, then pushed through the crowd to the door, it opening to give him passage, suddenly silent. At the door he paused and his laugh rang out suddenly.

"My going now doesn't matter," he repeated. "For no matter what you do now, I've won—and you're licked!"

CHAPTER XVI

A Moon Blood-Red

DESPITE that ominous boast, work went forward with a rush in the new Roam. For, with LeGrande and his hangers-on all gone, it was a new town, with Calhoun ridden out on a rail and even LeGrande scurrying for cover when warned, none of the others had cared to remain behind.

Ashamed of themselves for having been so gullible that they had been ready to sign up with Calhoun and desert the railroad, the men worked with a new intensity now. From that moment forward, come what might, Jeff knew that he could depend on them to the last ditch.

This was enhanced by the news that Nero would live. He was still a very sick man, who had come dangerously close to death, but he would get well. From being a divergent community, filled with hates, end of steel had suddenly become a closely knit, fighting unit.

They had reached and entered Hellgate Canyon now. No longer was there a weathered line of stakes marching across it, all but hidden in the grass. At long last, the spur was being built, at record-breaking speed.

There was no waste motion now. Jeff had thrown a part of his crew far ahead, blasting away the big boulders which barred their progress, turning the creek, building bridges, cutting and filling, starting to burrow into the mountans beyond for the tunnel.

There was a long line of track to be watched now, and this was a lot easier to patrol and guard against sabotage than to repair after rails had been carried off, cuts blasted down and bridges burned.

For this purpose he had sent back word to his own big Shavetail spread, imploring the boss to release several of the cowboys and send them along, to recruit others from neighboring ranches.

These boys wouldn't be of much use at building a railroad. They wouldn't swing a pick or shovel even for him, and he didn't want them for that job. But, scattered out along the line of steel which was already finished, with their cayuses and six-guns, they could keep an efficient eye out for trouble-makers. And almost from the start, they demonstrated their value, as wreckage fell off to an almost non-existent point.

"ME, I saw one two-legged coyote sneakin' up to a stretch of track where it didn't look like there was anybody around for miles," Slim Yankton reported. "I watched him a spell, and he had him a sort of a bar and was loosenin' the spikes in the ties, along one side. He pried away for mebby an hour, and had got quite a bit done while I watched him. Leavin' it lookin' all right, and if a train had come along, it'd sure have ditched the whole thing."

Slim stuffed fine-cut mechanically into his cheek and hitched reflectively at his chaps.

"He jumped close to ten feet when I spoke behind him, and he looked kind uh sick when I handed him a heavy sledge hammer and told him to drive them spikes in ag'in. Seemed

like he done so good a job, I kept him tampin' spikes up and down the track, swingin' that sledge, till I got so gosh-durned weary just watchin' him that I had to let him go. And would yuh believe it, when I woke up, he was snorin' not fifty feet away, too played out to even run."

But if his men were busy, Jeff was even more so. He was working harder than ever before in his life, and that meant a lot. Nora looked at him with concern in her eyes as he returned one day to snatch a bite to eat.

"Jeff Boone," she pronounced, "you're driving yourself too hard. You need a rest."

Jeff grinned at her.

"I don't see you resting much, Nora darlin', cooking and keeping house for Dinny McQuade, handling the mail for this whole crowd of tough track-eaters, nursing Nero and every other sick man on the side, not to mention keeping an eye on the whole railroad."

"Oh, that?" Nora tossed her head. "Sure and that's no job for me. I've done the same thing three years now, and it's just routine. But though you're a strong man, Jeff, even you can't stand it the way you're working now. It will get you down, unless you rest a little. And if that happens, what will happen to the railroad?"

"It hasn't got me down yet, Nora. Especial with the fine meals you invite me to every now and then."

"If I invite you to a good meal, it's to try and get you to rest a bit while you eat it, and for the sake of the railroad, instead of just grabbing a bite and running. But don't you ever sleep? I was up at daylight, and you were out on the line somewhere. And I woke up last night near midnight, and there was still a light burning in your car."

Jeff's grin was a little sheepish.

"That's the hardest part of this whole business, Nora. As troubleshooter, I don't think I do so bad. But as superintendent of construction, it's the devil of a mess. There's certain books and things must be tended to, and that sort of thing always did get me down."

"Then I'll look after the books for you, Jeff," Nora said promptly. "I can do it."

THERE was fleeting relief in Jeff's eyes. Then he shook his head.

"That's a kind offer, Nora, but you've too much to do as it is."

"I can do that all right, and I will," Nora insisted. "If you find I'm working too hard, you might get one of your string of cow-ponies and invite a lady to go for a ride with you some afternoon, at least for an hour or so."

Jeff's eyes brightened.

"Do you mean it, Nora? That you'd like to go for a ride with me?"

"If you'll go with me, I'd enjoy seeing some of this country, aside from this great gloomy canyon itself. When 'm in it, it fair gives me the shivers. But there must be something more than that, on a little way."

Jeff's enthusiasm was kindling now.

"There is, Nora. On beyond, it opens up and is a great country—a wilderness yet, but a great land. And there's canyons off at the side that I've been minded to explore if ever I got a bit of spare time—"

"Then, when you're minded to take me for that ride, Jeff, we'll start to explore them."

"How about tomorrow afternoon?"

"'Tis for you to name the time," Nora returned demurely. "After all, aren't you the big boss around here?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, then," Jeff said firmly.

He returned to his work with a new sparkle in his eye. That would be doubly a vacation—to get in the saddle and off away from the track for a little while, and to go riding with Nora.

He returned to Roam for supper, whistling, stopped short to stare. Nora was strolling toward him, her face eager and alight—and it took only a glance to tell him that this eagerness did not come from thinking of their proposed ride on the next afternoon. Walking beside her, looking as well as ever, was Dave Macy.

Macy lifted his hand in greeting, shook hands warmly.

"I just got in a few minutes ago," he explained. "Thought I'd better

run up to end of steel for a couple of days and see how things were going. You seem to have them humming right now, Jeff."

"They aren't going so bad, for the moment," Jeff admitted cautiously. He was puzzled, as always when he talked with Macy. Macy was an open and avowed enemy, and his presence here, aside from his desire to see Nora, would probably mean an attempt to put a spoke in the wheels which were beginning to turn too fast and smoothly. And yet, for all that, Jeff couldn't help liking him.

"You're to come over to supper in our car, Jeff," Nora reminded him. "It will be ready as soon as you are."

He could see that Macy was not too pleased. Probably he had counted on having Nora to himself this evening. Once supper was out of the way and Nora had whisked the dishes out of the way as well, she turned toward the rear part of the caboose, which had been partitioned off into her own private quarters and office.

"See you in the morning, Dave," she said. "I'm a working woman now, with books to keep."

Dave Macy took it with a good grace, strolled outside with Jeff, and presently moved off to his own private car, smoking a cigar as he went. Jeff watched him with oddly conflicting emotions.

He liked Dave Macy—and he hated him. Certanly he didn't trust him, and he could see that Macy's first apparent liking for himself was cracking fast. It was partly what they knew about each other, of course, but more than that, it was Nora.

Nora. Jeff thought he detected a change in her attitude toward Macy now; as if she sensed something about him which disturbed her. That dismissal of him, on the evening of his arrival here, was a good indication. For the books, tonight certainly, were just an excuse. They could have waited.

"Reckon I'll turn in early myself," Jeff decided. "Things are working up—to something." He paused outside his car to stare at the sickle of moon showing over the rim of Hellgate's mighty rim beyond—a moon blood-red and leering tonight.

"Blood on the moon," he muttered grimly. "And that's no figure of my imagination."

CHAPTER XVII

Confab in the Canyon

MACY had casually inspected things during the early part of the forenoon, then gotten a horse and ridden away to have a better look at the country beyond. Nora hadn't seemed to mind about anything, today. By early afternoon, her eyes were sparkling with excitement as she stood on the steps of the caboose and hailed Jeff, coming down along the row of cars there on the siding.

"How soon do we start, Jeff?"

"I'll have the horses around in ten minutes," he promised.

"I'll be ready," she agreed.

Jeff noticed that she rode as though thoroughly at home in the saddle. They followed the railroad across the foothill country to the rim of Hellgate and into the dark canyon itself, where the work went steadily forward. High overhead was blue sky and sunshine, but down in here one could look up and see faint stars. Instinctively they hurried their horses a little.

"It's nice country beyond," Jeff said.

"That's what I want to see," Nora retorted. "I've never been past this point."

Despite the fact that this was a holiday for them, there was a certain constraint between them now. Jeff felt it, and knew Nora did. Between them as they rode there was the shadow of Dave Macy.

Now the canyon was widening, sunshine coming into the valley to make it seem like a different place, and here, the grading operations proceeded beyond end of steel. Off at the side was that narrow canyon which Jeff had seen before and intended to explore. The trickle of water which had been coming down it then had entirely dried up now.

"We'll go up this way, if you like

the looks of it," Jeff said. "It looks to be tough going, but it will get us away from the railroad. From the looks, nobody has been up this way at all."

"That's what I want," Nora declared. "I love the railroad, Jeff—I don't think I need to tell you that. But I like to get off the beaten trails once in a while, where people don't go."

"This ought to do that," Jeff grinned. He led the way, picking a trail between boulders, pushing aside brush to make a path of sorts. For the first couple of hundred feet it was a fight to get through at all. Nature had conspired here to make a barrier to discourage any but the most venturesome. Thorn apples and rose briars intermingled with choke cherry and willow, with now and then an aspen or fir.

THEN abruptly they were past the barricade, out in the side-canyon itself—a high-walled canyon like the Hellgate, but not so narrow, so that the sunshine came in here like a benediction. Beyond it seemed to grow lower, the walls sloping more coulee-like. And here, less than a hundred yards from the main line of the spur, all sight and sound of man and man-made activity was shut away. In that two hundred feet it was as though they had stepped as many miles back into the wilderness.

Nora pulled her horse to a stop, and sat for a long minute, drinking it in. Jeff was silent, understanding her mood. The sparkle was coming back into her eyes as she looked.

For a quarter of a mile on ahead the canyon ran straight before it turned, and was clothed in the majesty of simple beauty. Nora drew a deep breath, flung her arms wide.

"Oh, Jeff," she breathed. "It's just what I wanted to see. It's so—so restful."

They rode ahead then, without speaking, letting their horses pick their own gait, wrapped in dreamy contentment, far removed from the strife and turmoil which were a part of daily life. Something of the mood which had been shared between them prior to the coming of Dave Macy was creeping back again. Jeff had no desire to shatter it by talk.

A man who had lived much alone, out on the far ranges, he had come to know what it was to keep silent, to understand that, at times, there could be communion far beyond mere words.

NORA flashed him a quick smile, still not speaking. They rounded the bend, to find another turn close at hand. Here the trail was brush-choked again, and Jeff took the lead, breaking a way with his own horse. Nora followed close behind. And in this order, with brush close upon either side and higher than their heads, Jeff halted suddenly at the sound of voices as they neared another bend. One came clearly.

"I tell you, Mr Macy, we can't help winning. The Northern will never get this spur finished before they go bankrupt, but just to make assurance doubly sure, we've got to get rid of this new trouble-shooter, Boone. He's too infernally efficient."

Jeff glanced hastily back. At that moment he would have given anything he possessed to get Nora away from there without having heard that much, but to do so was utterly out of the question. One look at her face showed that she had heard as clearly as he, that she had recognized the voice of Calhoun, the silver-tongued pleader who had been ridden out of Roam on a rail.

Calhoun, here, talking to Dave Macy. Already he had said enough so that Nora's face was a study, but at sight of the look on Jeff's she quickly laid her finger across her lips, imperiously commanding that he be silent.

To turn and retreat, with the brush so thick on either side of them, was out of the question. They could only go ahead. And already, Dave Macy was answering.

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that you're so confident Calhoun. For, the way he's driving ahead, he's getting the railroad built, all right. I don't particularly wonder that you want to be rid of him."

There was a hint in that which Cal-

houn did not overlook. His voice came a little thick.

"Wouldn't you want to pay him back if he'd had you tarred and feathered and ridden on a rail?"

Macy's voice was still soothing, though it sounded, underneath, as if he were laughing.

"I imagine I would, Calhoun. Though, from what I hear, you made an error of judgment in having that shot taken at Nero, in such a place."

"I figured he could stop Nero's tongue without getting caught and involving me. LeGrande said he was a gunman by profession. It would have slowed things down a lot if it had worked out."

FROM where Jeff and Nora sat their horses, it was impossible to see the speakers, who were a little farther up the canyon, and thoroughly hidden by the brush. And it was apparent, from the freedom with which they spoke, they were confident of being far from any prying ears.

"Too bad it didn't work out," Macy agreed. "But if you have things as well in hand as you claim, it won't matter so much."

"LeGrande says that we can't fail," Calhoun said confidently. "It doesn't make much difference how fast they go ahead at present, or how much grade they build. They will just bring the Northern that much nearer to bankruptcy. And that's what your syndicate is working for, as I understand it."

"That's what we're working for," Macy agreed, and at the twisted look of pain on Nora's face, Jeff turned his own head away. "The spur has to fail—and the Northern has to go under. There are several of us with a lot at stake in that deal."

"But it's coming along all right at your end, isn't it?"

"Very nicely. If you and LeGrande can do as well here, we won't have any worries."

"We'll handle this end of it. As I say, how much track gets laid now don't make a bit of difference. Of course, we'll keep on harassing them one way and another—you can trust LeGrande for that."

"We're trusting you. If you do it, there's that bonus, of course. If you fail—"

"If we fail, we run all the risk." Calhoun's voice was a little bitter. "For in that case, Boone will hang our hides on the fence, and he won't do it just figuratively, either. You're the lucky one—with a position way up on the Northern, where you can put a monkey wrench in the machinery any time, but where you're safe no matter what happens, and not a chance of being suspected."

"I risk plenty," Macy retorted impatiently. "If you had any idea how thin some of the ice is that I've crossed, you wouldn't have any cause for complaint."

"Oh, I'm not complaining—though I had one devil of a job getting that tar and feathers cleaned off me, and I was so sure I couldn't sit down for a couple of days. Riding a rail is about the toughest proposition I've ever tried."

"You were lucky that they didn't hang you."

"Maybe I was." Calhoun's voice was suddenly venomous. "But I know who I have to thank for what did happen to me. The others would have been satisfied with one victim and forgot all about me, if it hadn't been for Boone. And that's just one more reason why we've got to get rid of him."

"You mean"—Macy's voice sounded a little strained—"run him out of the country?"

"Yes. It's up to you to fire him."

"I can't. Hamby hired him, and I've talked to Hamby. They are personal friends, and Hamby's the only man who can fire him. Which, of course, he won't do."

"In that case," and they could hear Calhoun's teeth click, "we have to be rid of him, more than ever. Even Hamby can't bring a dead man back to life."

CHAPTER XVIII

Words Along the Wire

NORA'S horse lifted its head, ears perking forward. Nora read its intention to whinny, and reaching forward swiftly, she

clamped her fingers over its nostrils. Her face was desperate as she looked at Jeff—a blend of dismay, incredulity, anger, and a deep and ever growing hurt which he was powerless to do anything against. Macy was speaking again.

"You think it's necessary to go that far, Calhoun?"

"Think? I know damned well it is. If anybody could upset our plans —and mind you, I agree with LeGrande that nothing can spoil them now—but if anybody could, he's the man. You'd ought to know what he's done already."

"He saved my life, among other things."

"I heard about that. But you saved his neck in turn, so that makes the slate clean. As you know, I've no cause to love him, myself. But LeGrande told me to put it up to you straight. Either you would get rid of him in your own way, or he would, in his way."

There was a long moment of silence. And something like a sigh in Macy's voice.

"I would if I could. Like I say, I'm powerless."

"Then we'll handle it. With all that you've got involved in this thing, you shouldn't kick about making sure."

"I don't like the idea of killing him," Macy confessed. "But I've got a lot more at stake in this than you may think."

"Yeh, I know about your affair of the heart. I'd think you'd be glad to have him out of the way."

"Well, of course, you and LeGrande are running this end of it."

"Then, since you agree, you can go back to headquarters and watch that end of it. You won't have to worry now, even if nothing much does seem to happen here for a while. When LeGrande gets ready to strike, you'll hear plenty then. And now I'll be getting back."

"Be seeing you," Macy agreed.

There was a jingle of bits, the sound of a horse turning, picking its way back up the canyon, breaking suddenly into a gallop and dying rapidly away to silence again. Then, as if moving a little wearily, the sound of Macy catching up his own horse and climbing into the saddle.

They waited in sudden tenseness. He was coming toward them, and still it was impossible to get off that brush-choked trail or to turn without his hearing them. A moment later he came into sight, riding with chin on chest, apparently lost in reverie.

He jerked his head up, staring, his face going suddenly white. With Jeff there ahead, and Nora immediately behind him, it was impossible, even without the look on their faces, to misunderstand. They had heard at least enough, he saw, to know.

MACY pulled his own horse to a sudden stop. He opened his mouth, but no words came. At the look on Nora's face, dismay crept into his eyes.

"Nora!" he exclaimed.

"Traitor!" Nora flung at him, and her own voice, high-pitched, was dangerously near to breaking. "Murderer! Oh!"

She swung her own horse violently around in the narrow trail, crashing down the brush to do it, and Jeff turned his own as well. In that moment, the face of Dave Macy was the face of a man in torment. He spurred suddenly to keep up with them, his voice came passionate, pleading.

"Nora! Let me explain, Nora. Oh, Nora darling, I love you—"

As abruptly as she had spurred to a headlong pace, Nora pulled up again, swinging her horse around so that she could confront him. Her eyes were blazing now, through a mist of tears.

"I never want to see you again," she said, and there was a curious finality about the tone, even more than the words, which seemed to halt Macy, to check the words which had been upon his lips. As Nora and Jeff turned again and rode on down the canyon, he was still sitting his horse there, staring after them with eyes like those of a man whose world has suddenly crashed in ruin about his ears.

Nora rode a little ahead of Jeff, for the way was wider here, her back straight and uncompromising. Until they had rounded the next turn,

nearly a quarter of a mile below, and were out of sight. Then she turned suddenly to Jeff, and her face was woebegone, dissolving in a mist of tears.

"Oh, Jeff, take me home," she sobbed.

Jeff reined his own horse close alongside, and for a long minute she leaned against him, her face buried on his chest, clutching convulsively at him and crying heartbrokenly. Then she straightened suddenly, and he could see a fresh gleam of fury and determination in her eyes.

"I'm all right now, Jeff," she said simply. "It was a little hard to take —but they're not going to destroy the railroad!"

Their ride home was almost as silent as the trip out had been. They picked their way through the tangle of thorns at the foot of the canyon, coming into Hellgate again, and emerging finally from it into the sunset, then on across the more level country in the settling dusk and so to Roam again.

Nora rode, her face white and set, and Jeff, knowing how she felt, could find no words of comfort. They were almost back to town when she turned to him again.

"And so he would even agree to having you killed, Jeff—as well as destroy the railroad! What are you going to do?"

"Well, I aim to keep my eyes open, same as I've been doing," Jeff conceded. "Someway, I don't much like the sound of attending my own funeral—not yet a while."

"That wasn't what I meant, Jeff. And I know the position you are in —he is general superintendent of the railroad, and to bring such charges against your superior wouldn't be easy. So I'm going to send a telegram to Mr Hamby myself—now. You'll come along, won't you, Jeff?"

"Of course," he agreed, and eyed her with new admiration. Her heart was breaking, he knew, but she was thinking of him, of the railroad, and her courage ran as high and fierce as ever. She rode direct to the telegraph car, where Hank Measen was just getting ready to close up.

"You can run along and get your supper, Hank," she said. "Jeff and I have a message to send, but I'll do it myself."

"Sure," Hank agreed. "You can send near as good as I can, and that's something, if I do say it myself."

THEY entered the car and Nora slid into the operator's chair, her finger on the key, her face white and set. For a few minutes she worked with it in silence, looking up suddenly.

"I'm demanding that they rout Garth Hamby out of some dinner or something and bring him to the instrument himself," she explained. "He is a pretty good telegrapher, and I want him to get this straight—not to have some clerk, who might be a traitor, not give it to him at all. They didn't want to disturb him, but I told him it was you calling, and they're bringing him."

She was silent a minute longer, then her face became animated as the keys began to click.

"He's on the wire himself," she explained. Her own fingers set expertly to work, and as she sent the message, she spoke it aloud for Jeff's benefit.

"Nora McQuade sending, Mr Hamby. Jeff Boone is here with me. We went for a horseback ride this afternoon, up a side-canyon from Hellgate. Hidden by deep brush, we overheard Calhoun, who was ridden out of town on a rail the other night, talking to Dave Macy. Macy is a traitor, working with a syndicate for the ruin of the Northern, to insure that the spur shall not be built.".

Her voice grew tense and passionate, her fingers fairly flew on the keys now.

"Calhoun is working with LeGrande, the gambler. Macy says the Northern must go bankrupt, the spur fail. Calhoun demanded that he fire Jeff Boone. Macy said only you could do that, and that you wouldn't. So Calhoun said Jeff must be killed, and Macy agreed. You will know what to do with a traitor like Macy, Mr Hamby—if if ever shows his face in public again."

She paused suddenly, and her lips

quivered. There was a moment of silence, then the answer was coming over the wires, and she repeated it aloud as well.

"I'll know what to do with Macy, if he shows up again," Garth Hamby promised, and Jeff could picture the granite jaw, the icy eyes of the man as he sent that message. "Have suspected him for some time. Tell Jeff to watch his step."

Mechanically, Nora closed the key, remained for a moment, staring out the window at the line of raw grade and rails stretching beyond, lost now in the settling night. Her eyes were unseeing, and again her chin trembled. Jeff resisted an impulse to take her into his arms, to try and comfort her. What comfort could he give, when her heart was breaking because the man she loved had betrayed her trust so grossly?

Suddenly she sprang up again, turned to face him.

"Well, that's done, Jeff," she said. "And I want you to remember what Mr Hamby said about watching your step. For it's good advice."

"I'll remember," Jeff promised.

But he knew that she scarcely heard him. Mechanically now, she stepped down from the car, started walking along the path back to her own caboose, only half a dozen cars away. Jeff swung down, followed at a respectful distance behind her. She had forgotten all about him now. He saw her reach her own little sanctuary, climb the steps and open the door, closing it almost gently. Without looking back.

He paused underneath the window for a moment, rubbing his chin in perplexity, stiffened. From inside came the sound of bitter sobbing. For a moment longer he waited, then, scowling blackly, strode down the track toward his own car.

CHAPTER XIX

The Thundering Herd

IT WAS A perfect night but for all that, Jeff had done little sleeping. His mind kept going back over the events of the afternoon, even as he turned restlessly in his bunk. He had wanted to save Nora from the shock of that revelation of Dave Macy's perfidy, but fate had worked it out with an ironic grimness of its own.

Jeff swung out of his bunk, dressed, and stepped out into the night. The sharp bite of frost in the air was in marked contrast to the heat which would come with early afternoon, but it fitted his own mood now. It was another hour before the camp would be stirring, and he wanted to get away. Physical activity might help to quiet the endless circle in his mind.

A glance showed him the stock, off a little more than a mile, peacefully grazing, scattered over a territory a half mile square—the work horses and mules, and his own saddle string, off out there, with one man riding night herd, though usually there was little herding to do for stock which worked as hard by day as the men.

He paused, looking again, conscious that something wasn't exactly as it should be. Daylight was coming, enough so that he could see fairly well at that distance.

Eyes narrowed, he saw what it was. There was nobody riding herd out there now. Or if there was, he had gone off somewhere, dismounted and stretched out on the ground for a little rest. That was permissible, of course, and probably what had happened. Jeff was turning away again, when two other things impinged upon his consciousness almost together.

The first was sound—a faint, far-off sound now, scarcely a whisper on the dawn. It might have passed for a rising wind coming with the breaking day, or a far-off mutter of thunder. But it stiffened Jeff like a hound catching some alien scent on the air, his own nostrils pinching together a little. And as he half turned to face it, he saw the other thing.

IT HAD LITTLE significance at the first casual glance. Just a horse, a little way off, cropping the

grass hungrily. But this horse was saddled, the bridle reins dragged, and it was far from where a horse ought to be at this hour. Moreover, Jeff recognized it as the horse which the night herder was supposed to be riding.

His first thought was that the herder had ridden in to the edge of town and was somewhere nearby, helping himself to a cup of coffee from the pot usually left standing for such purposes. That, too, would be all right, at this hour, with grazing stock all easy to see in the growing light. But with sharpened perceptions, Jeff was striding across to the horse.

It jerked its head up at sight of him, shying a little, skittishly. Which was unusual again for as old and trusty a cow pony as this one. Usually nothing made it nervous, which was one of the reasons it was used for this work, these night herders weren't regular cowboys and Jeff strongly suspected that they wouldn't get along so well with a half broken cayuse.

Even as the horse shied, he understood the reason for its jitters. There was a stain of blood on the saddle seat and spilling down the skirt—dried blood.

In those few seconds, the first sound had been growing upon the air. It was still like a far-off, mutter of thunder, but at this season of the year, on a cloudless, frosty morning, there would be no thunder. Already, though he could not quite see it, Jeff had a growing hunch as to what that sound would be, for he had heard it before, several times. The noise of a big herd of cattle on stampede.

He was in the saddle, touching the horse with the spurs, swinging out fast from the town. Off at the side he could still see the grazng herd of mules and horses, but they were beginning to lift their heads and stare now, sensing that something was wrong. Then, sweeping over the edge of the horizon, half a mile away, the vanguard broke into sight like the onrush of a mighty ocean wave curling across the beach with the violence of storm behind it.

The slope of hills, low and outspread, had hidden them up to now, but as they surged into sight the drumming of hoofs and hoarse bawling in hundreds of terrified throats, which had made that far-off mutter like an oncoming storm, increased tenfold to an ominous roar. Spurring hard, hat settled low on his head and leaning forward in the saddle, Jeff felt another chill. He had seen some bad stampedes in the past, he knew how dangerous a big herd, running amok, could be. But this looked as grim with possibilities as anything in all his experience.

This had been planned for destruction!

THERE was a solid front of tossing horns, thundering hoofs and gleaming red backs a half-mile wide, with more cattle pouring along behind in what seemed a never ending tide. And they were running hard, steadily, bawling still in that grip of terror which held the whole big herd in thrall—heading straight for the work horses and mules—the big beef herd of Barrier Ranch!

Jeff had no way of estimating how many thousand head there might be in that herd, but it was a tremendous one. Few men in the country owned as many cattle as Lon Hensley had been running for years over the vast spread of acres which he did not own, and it looked to Jeff as if his riders must have spent every day since his own clash with Hensley at the borders of the Barrier, in patiently gathering this vast herd, with the present purpose in mind.

Now they had chosen well. During the darkness, someone had lifted the man on night herd out of the saddle with a well placed bullet, and no one was likely to be astir in Roam for at least half an hour. The gathered herd had been stampeded by a crew of experts, in another five minutes they would be surging over and around the horses and mules, enveloping them like a vast dragnet and sweeping them along with them.

That would leave no horses even to

start gathering the scattered stock with again, and it was a foregone conclusion that Hensley wouldn't let them have any. He would have the excuse that he needed all his own horses for his own men to use to round up his own herd.

By the time horses could be brought back, at least three or four days would have gone by—wasted days in which the work would be virtually at a standstill. And three or four days, in this grim race against time, might easily spell defeat.

Jeff was riding as he had seldom ridden before. This cow pony was old in service, close to the retired list, but he seemed to sense the urgency of his task now. Sweeping for the corner of the oncoming stampede, ears laid back as if, like Jeff, he sensed the immensity of the task which they were trying to do.

They had to turn the edge of the stampede, swing the thundering herd on a point so that they would miss the mules and horses. It was the only chance to save them.

And if they refused to swing for one lone rider in their path, with terror spurring them on—well, it would be just too bad for that horse and rider. Jeff had seen men before, cowboys who knew their business, who had been caught in the path of a stampede. It hadn't been a pretty sight.

He was yelling now, his own voice hardly a whisper against the rolling drum of hoofs and ceaseless bellowing. Shouting, waving his hat as he came at them. Neither act alone would do it. But he was at a pivotal point, the corner of the big herd. If he could press hard enough against the leaders and force them to swing, the herd would turn with them.

NOW HE was up with them, so that he could feel their hot breath, could see the reddened glare in glassy eyes where terror had crowded out everything else. Eyes which looked at him without a change. Just behind, dust was pounding up, torn out of the grass roots by that heavy roll of hoofs.

They were running with the herd now, trying to force those leaders to veer. There wasn't much time. The horses and mules had shied, turning to run, and by luck taking the right direction. But they had been too slow, were turning now, after a short run, heads upflung, to watch the big herd, snorting at sight of them. And perilously close.

The herd had to swing now or it would envelop them as it had been planned to do. More, they would break and turn in a few seconds or, fighting them at right angles to their course, his own horse couldn't stand against them.

Jeff jerked his revolver, leaned out and pounded the barrel into a bawling snout, rapped the steal hard against a long, gleaming horn. With a bawl in which pain and rage displaced the dull monotony of fear, the big leader swung sharply. The others hesitated but herd instinct was strong in them. For a moment the whole rippling river of flesh swirled, followed.

Sweating, almost trembling with relief, Jeff slowed at the turning edge, lifting his head for a wider survey of the whole scene. For a moment he stared incredulously, then was spurring in a sudden fresh agony of desperation.

Off at an angle, still some distance ahead of the onsweeping herd and running desperately but hopelessly, sure to be caught in the red tide was Nora.

CHAPTER XX

Stampede's End

THE LAST thing that he had expected to see was Nora, out there, trapped in the path of the stampede. But instantly he understood. If he had been upset by the events of the preceding afternoon, unable to sleep, it had been worse for Nora. Like him, she had gotten up to take a walk, to be alone, little dreaming of danger.

It was going to be a close race. Since she was some little distance ahead of the herd, and he could ride at right angles, he knew that he could reach her before the main line of the stampede did. But after that—He had to sweep her up into the saddle with him, and then, with the herd

wide on both sides, try to get out of their way.

Already he had given this old cow pony a hard run—probably the hardest that the range veteran had taken in a good many years. It had responded nobly, doing all that he asked of it; but it had just about given its all for that cause. He doubted whether it had enough reserve left to keep going for long ahead of that remorselessly moving avalanche of hoofs and horns—even without the burden of carrying double.

But this was no matter of choice; though his cayuse was faltering now, he spurred on. His shout came to Nora's ears, and he saw her wild glance find him, caught the sudden light of hope in her eyes where there had been a terror to equal that in the glazed eyes of the cattle.

He was coolly calculating their chances, almost up with her. And in that moment his pony stumbled, pitching to its knees, tried desperately to get to its feet and go on, then went down in a sprawling heap of quivering flesh.

It had done nobly, but this was the end for it. But it had kept trying to run long enough for Jeff to kick his feet clear of the strirups, to fling himself off in the clear as it collapsed. Nora was only a dozen feet ahead, fresh dismay in her eyes at this new calamity which had caught Jeff as well as herself. And the never slowing herd was not much farther behind!

Jeff whirled almost as he steadied himself from that sudden dismounting, jerking his gun again. It was a small enough chance; as it was. His first shot had to be well placed, for a miss here, or even a fatal shot in the wrong place, would be fatal for Nora and himself as well. With it, he had to drop one of those big steers which lunged in the vanguard, drop him in his tracks and in one certain place, to do them any good.

HE TOOK his time, seeming to Nora to waste precious seconds before he pulled the trigger. But the big .45 slug went exactly where he aimed it, reaching the heart, and the heaving steer rolled three or four steps to collapse almost on top of the fallen cow pony.

Now, with a cold and deadly precision but speed which raced against time, Jeff was emptying his gun. Two other steers fell, one tumbling squarely into the pile made by the other two animals, the other right at the side. And then the herd was upon them.

Jeff had one arm around Nora, holding her close to him, standing just behind that puny barricade which his shots had managed to erect. The horse was doubled up, the first steer sprawled directly beside it and partly on top, the third had fallen on top of both of them, so that their bodies made a mound now some six feet high and a little wider than that.

Before this barricade the herd was splitting, cleaving like a knife in butter. Standing there, as close to the still quivering mass of flesh which formed this barrier as they could get, Jeff could feel the hot breaths of steers hurtling past on either side, hear the constant pounds of hoofs and rattle of horns. And, pressed close against him, the trembling Nora.

But her eyes were clear and serene now as she stood with him, the panic of utter desperation which had been in her face was gone. Then she had had no chance, and she had realized it. Now, with even a fighting chance for life, she could take it with the same high courage which he had seen her exhibit before.

Only a few feet beyond, the split herd pressed together again, so that now they were surrounded by a solid sea of racing cattle. Some were jostled or pressed in closer by the tremendous weight on their flanks, so that now and again, huddle back as they would, the beef pressed against them. And by this time the dust was all about them in that swirling, choking cloud.

Jeff had hastily reloaded, but he did not shoot again. A bad shot might make a fresh pile-up at the side or ahead, which would crowd others over against them. Now, with the dust so heavy, the cattle which pounded past were paying no attention to them, and it began to look as if the stampede would flow past in safety.

Then there was a heavy shock as

some steer, perhaps blinded in the dust, surged head-on into the barricade without swinging to either side, and instantly, behind him, the others were following in the same way.

JEFF leaped up on the dead horse, emptied his gun again as fast as possible, and dropped two more back there, saw the herd cleave again. He was sweating as he stepped back down beside Nora. For even animals the size of a horse could be quickly pounded into the dust if the full swing of the stampede went over them.

"They're beginning to thin out a little, I think," Nora said suddenly.

"Looks so," Jeff agreed. It was possible to speak now without shouting, which was further proof that most of the big herd had swept past them. Likewise the dust was slowly thinning. He coughed, sneezed, and managed to grin.

"Looks like the first order of the day would be a bath, when we get back."

Nora turned to stare at him for the first time, and burst out laughing.

"Jeff! You look as if you had a mask on! Why, I can hardly see any of you except your eyes. And I suppose I'm the same way."

"Well, you're still right pretty to look at, Nora, but some soap and water sure wouldn't do any harm, under the circumstances. Well, there's the last straggler, looke like."

Off at the side, running slowly, exhausted, came one of the weaker cows, still following in the blind instinct of terror and herd loyalty. Lon Hensley had gambled on striking a crushing blow at the railroad today, and to do that he had not worried about the cost to himself. But there would be many dead cattle among the weaker animals, scattered across miles of the prairie, and the other would require a month to recuperate flesh and strength from the effects of that terrible run.

The dust was gradually settling again, the roar of hoofs was dying away in the distance. Nora sobered as she looked around.

"Jeff, it seems almost a miracle that we're still alive. And I wouldn't have been—if you hadn't come. I'll never forget it, Jeff. You looked like an angel, looming up there so suddenly."

"Nothing angelic about me but my hat," Jeff tried to joke. "It took flight somewhere back there, but I don't suppose even it kept on going up."

"How did you happen to be out here, Jeff, just when I needed you?"

"Pure luck." Jeff explained his finding the horse, hearing the stampede, and seeing what was impending.

"And there's the work stock, off at the side there—still making hay-bailers of themselves, just as if nothing had happened. So it looks as if we won't lose any time on that account."

Nora still clung tightly to Jeff's arm, and her face was a little white as as looked around.

"Nobody else could have done it," she said. "You're sure a trouble-shooter, Jeff. But you risked almost certain death to try and save me. Even if your horse hadn't played out, and you had gotten me up in front of you —there wasn't much chance."

"It looked to me like it was worth taking, and it did work out," Jeff returned. He tried to make his voice light, but looking at her, where she had brushed away as much of the dirt as possible with her handkerchief, he felt his throat tightening. "One thing, Nora, I sure couldn't do anything else. Not with you out there."

"I know, Jeff." Her hand came back to his arm again, a light touch this time, almost like a caress, her voice was soft. "I think that's why I wasn't frightened—after I saw you coming." Then, for a moment, horror crept back into her voice. "But when your horse went down—"

"Let's just have a look at the poor old cayuse, while we're about it." She looked at him quickly at the underlying grimness in his voice. Jeff was tugging to move the steer, which was partly across the horse, a little to one side. He heaved, bent down, and pointed.

"I thought there was something mighty funny about that," he added. "He was an old pony, and a mighty gallant one. If there's a horse heaven, I reckon he's earned a mighty good

pasture for himself. He didn't just stumble—his feet seemed to leave him, then he tried to catch himself and keep on going, but he just couldn't make the grade. Here's why."

He pointed. Nora stared with widening eyes at the betraying mark, which was still bleeding. A high-powered rifle bullet, from somewhere off at the side, had come, piercing the old mustang's gallant heart.

CHAPTER XXI

A White Plume Blossoming

NEITHER of them said anything, though Nora lifted her head and swiftly scanned the brightening horizon again. Then she looked at Jeff, and her eyes were tender. But the horizon was clear now.

That bullet, of course, had been aimed for Jeff himself.

Someone had been riding on the edge of the big herd, who had been along in helping to stampede them. And he had been ruthlessly determined that, as had been agreed on the day before, Jeff Boone must be gotten out of the way.

Now, however, with the stampede past, the dust vanishing and day coming fast, and with Roam roused like a kicked-over ant hill by the thunder of the herd going past its doors, the riders who had started the big herd on that run had discreetly withdrawn.

"Guess we'd better go back and get that bath," Jeff said, his tone casual again. "And breakfast. We've both had enough walk for a while, eh?"

Nora glanced quickly at him, and a little smile crept into her eyes, lingered in new understanding.

"I guess so, Jeff," she agreed. "You're to come to breakfast in my car. I'll have hot cakes and sausage."

"I'll be there," Jeff promised. He halted suddenly. They were past where the edge of the stampede had swept now, out of that dusty, trampled grass, to longer, greener pastures, still white with frost. Out of this something stirred, called weakly. A moment later they found Clint Newman, the man who had been riding night herd.

His face was drained white, and his shirt was bloody, but, to Jeff's vast surprise and relief, he was still alive.

"If you could give me a hand, it would help," he suggested. "I don't know just what happened. I was ridin', off on the far edge of the herd, last night, two-three miles from town, when something seemed to hit me. Shot, I guess, and I went clear out of the saddle. Guess I fainted, and must have been out quite a spell. Then I come to and started crawlin' for town —and I got this far when the herd went past. Thought it was all up when I saw them, but they missed me complete."

"Which they'd never have done if Jeff hadn't turned them," Nora exclaimed. "Jeff, go on and send out men with a stretcher. I'll have a look at this wound while you're doing it. It's bad one."

It was bad enough, but after living to crawl a couple miles or so, Cliff Newman had a good chance. And his crawling, as much as Jeff's swinging the stampede, had saved him from that onrush of hoofs.

HALF an hour late, because there had been no one ready on a saddle horse to bring the others in, the work of the railroad was going on as usual.

Today there was added activity, for once again end of steel had to march forward. This time the new camp town was to be set up just outside the mouth of Hellgate Canyon, but close up beside that mighty barrier of hills. The work up to the canyon was practically complete, even the line of steel was creeping up along the gloom of the canyon floor. Roam had enjoyed a briefer day of glory than most of the other towns which had marked end of steel in their turn, for now the railroad was surging ahead, no longer creeping.

"Never saw a town last so short a spell as this one," Hank Measen confided. "Which is plumb all right with me. I've been itchin' to get off this prairie and across to the mountains. Though, for a right well behaved town, and one quiet enough for a church sociable, Roam sure had the potato medal comin' to it. Ain't been

a man killed in town since the first day, exceptin' for that hangin', and not even a shootin' scrape since then."

Which was, perhaps, as good an epitaph as any for Roam, for by night it was not even a ghost town. It had completely ceased to exist. Where the other towns at end of steel had maintained their identity, with at least a few buildings and a few inhabitants, and, fed by the railroad, would probably kepp on, some to exist and some to grow, Roam was gone to the last shack, loaded onto the flat cars and jerked ahead to the new town of Hellgate. Only a few piles o. tin cans and other debris marked what had been.

But the railroad was building ahead, that was the big thing. Deep in the frowning canyon of the Hellgate progress was being maintained at almost the same pace it had rambled across the spreading acres of the Barrier. Which was vitally necessary. Snows, here in the mountains, would come early, slowing them down somewhat, and the rough country beyond would eat into any days gained here.

Because of that, Jeff was working harder than ever, trying to be in half a dozen places at once, driving his crews to greater efforts. On the afternoon following the day of the stampede, Nora stopped him as he hurried from his own car.

"Are you in such a hurry, Jeff, that you can't even find time to say hello?" she challenged.

Jeff swung around, grinning half sheepishly.

"Nora," he confided, "sometimes I think—when I stop to think—that I'm making a fool of myself. As a button I used to work this way, and the first thing I knew, where had it landed me? Why, I was foreman of the biggest spread in a hundred miles of country, with the chance of workin' that much harder. And right then, when I got a minute to think in, I resolved to change my ways."

"And did you?"

"Did I? How does one find out? I thought I had learned to take it easy and let the other fellow do the work. But here I am, upsetting all those hard-earned principles, when I might a lot better be talking to the prettiest girl in the country."

"Thank you, kind sir, she said." Nora made him a half mocking curtsey. "Have you forgotten that we were supposed to go riding now and then? Or are you too busy for that?"

JEFF stared for a moment. Since that other ride, he had had a hunch that Nora wouldn't be anxious for another—not right away.

"We'll find time for riding again," he promised. "Right now, though, I've got to go up the canyon a ways, and pump a hand car, at that." He grimaced at the thought. "I'd a lot rather ride a cayuse, but it's more expedient to break my back, I guess."

"Well, I can help pump," Nora said promptly. "Be with you right away, Jeff. You see," she added, laughing, "I'm not waiting for you to make any further excuses."

Lifting the car onto the rails, Jeff pondered. Nora had actually laughed! Of course, she liked to get out, to get next to things, anything to keep busy, to help her to forget.

A little ruefully he watched her coming toward him. That was what he had been trying to do, lately—but with her besde him, it was impossible to forget her for a moment—though it was equally impossible when she was away, too.

She sprang onto one end of the hand car, grabbed the handle and started to pump along with his motion. Jeff protested, as the car picked up speed, clicking with a steady rhythm.

"No need for you to work your passage, Nora. I've plenty of that which is supposed to go with a weak head—a strong back."

"So have I," Nora retorted promptly. "And I like to pump." She stared around at the towering, massy walls on either side of them. In here, though it was only mid-afternoon, it was almost dusk now, and the men working near the track were shadowy figures. A little farther ahead, where a cluster of them were busy, they had built a big bonfire for light.

"This is a strange sort of place, isn't it?" she said. "So—so sort of

lifeless. Nothing grows in here at all, does it?"

"Not along here," Jeff conceded. The creek ran, its bank barren of willows, trees or grass of any sort. The pools were black as ink in this light, somehow forbidding. And the walls rose so sheerly in most places, solid ledges of stone, that only an expert mountain climber could possibly have made his way up or down, with the best of equipment. There seemed, from down here, to be no top to them.

Ahead, now, was the work train, half a dozen cars, the two flats up ahead of the engine, Dinny McQuade at the throttle, pushing the line of finished steel a little farther along. Here was swarming activity again, with the headlight of the locomotive trying to pierce the gloom, shadowy figures darting in and out of it.

They jumped off the hand car, lifted it off the track, and started ahead on foot. Casey Ryan, lounging in the cab, waved a grimy paw at them.

"Sure, and it's like working in the lower regions," he confided. "Niver a glimpse of sun or moon, though sometimes yez can see a few stars above, to know that hiven is still in its place. A few more days and we'll be past this narrow part—and 'tis thankful I am at the thought."

"But we're getting there," Jeff reminded. He stared thoughtfully up at those frowning walls which shut them in, his gaze sweeping along them. Suddenly he tensed. Almost directly above, something had blossomed out in a little, spreading white plume—far up overhead, near the top.

Even as he saw it, a portion of the ledge up there seemed to move, to start to topple outward, to disintegrate. Jeff's stentorian roar sounded an instant before the reverberating boom dropped down to them.

"Duck under the cars or for cover, quick, everybody! Landslide!"

He grabbed Nora, leaped for the shelter of the cab, carrying her with him as the roar from above gained crescendo. But though this was, strictly speaking, a landslide toppling down upon them, it was man-made, as the smoke of the blast had shown him in giving a few seconds' warning.

CHAPTER XXII

Dry Watercourse

MEN were running wildly, dropping everything to seek some sort of cover. Jeff's warning had given them a few precious seconds' leeway, and, far more to the point, it had given them definite orders as to what to do.

Even so, there was little enough time. The thing had been planned diabolically, someone climbing around and up there, to set a charge of explosive where it would tear loose tons of earth and rock, to send it dropping down upon the workers huddled a thousand feet below. By the time Jeff had jumped inside the cab of the engine, the first of it was raining down around them.

For a few moments the air was full of it, a thunderous clatter of rock and the rising dust of dirt. The locomotive reeled to the shock of a heavy chunk of stone, flying splinters showered through the cab. Nora was still in Jeff's arms, her own were clinging tightly to him.

Perhaps a hundred tons of dirt and rock had been loosened up above and had plummeted down upon them. But one factor had been in their favor. Though it had all been torn out of one place by a single heavy blast, jarring loose an overhang, the distance of fall had served to spread it considerably, so that now there was debris spread for two hundred yards up and down the canyon floor, and filling it more or less from side to side.

Out from under the cars or wherever they could find any sort of shelter, men were beginning to emerge, a little dazed yet by the suddenness of it all, but grim-faced with bitter anger. Jeff issued swift orders.

"Sam, you and Joe keep watch on things up above. If you see any activity, give warning in a hurry, and everybody duck for cover again. Lew, Mike, Tony, come with me, and we'll see if anybody is trapped or hurt. The rest of you, dig the tracks clear as quick as you can, so that we can run the train back out of here."

Dinny McQuade was out, surveying the damage to his cherished locomotive, swearing in the intensity of his rage. That smashing boulder which had struck it a glancing blow and had all but jarried it off the rails was lying in the creek now, twenty feet away, broken in two pieces, but it had left its mark in a huge dent on the armor above. Other piles of stone and dirt were everywhere, the flat cars were full of it, but no really serious damage seemed to have been done to the train.

NO ONE had been seriously hurt, thanks to Jeff's warning. One man had a broken arm, several were bruised up, but that was the worst. Had there been no warning, many must have died.

"We can clean this out as good as ever, but it'll take about an extra day's work to do it," Dinny growled. "And what they've done to me engine —'twill be a divil av a job to iver get it lookin' like itsilf again."

Joe Purdy called, low-voiced, to Jeff, pointing skyward.

"I though I saw somebody move up there," he said. "See, to the side of that black rock."

High above them, to the left of the new scar where the blast had shaken loose the slide, and at the edge of the skyline, a tiny figure did move in the sunlight. Whoever had set the blast had returned for a look at the result. Joe thrust a rifle into Jeff's hands.

Jeff nodded, taking the rifle. Down here, he knew, it would be only a pit of blackness, for anyone looking down from up above, and their movements could not be seen. He aimed briefly, squeezed the trigger.

"Look at him scramble out of there!" Joe chortled. "Man, you sure laced it close enough to give him something to think about."

"Hope so," Jeff agreed. He was rather relieved than otherwise by the incident. If there had been any other charges of explosives already set, they would have been fired before now, sending down more tons of rock to choke the gorge. But it seemed evident that this blast had been aimed to catch them by surprise, to do as much damage as possible at one stroke.

Now, while daylight lingered up above, it would be unhealthy for anyone to venture there and try to set any more dynamite. And Jeff had already dispatched six of his best men, with rifles, to circle around out of the canyon at its upper end, to make the arduous climb to the heights and there to spread out on both sides, keeping a sharp watch.

He should have done that before but that was one trick he had overlooked. However, it would be a most unhealthy undertaking to try it again; he would send other men up with tents, blankets and supplies, extra men to take different watches to keep guard at all hours of the day and night. Any prowler would be given a hot reception.

This was war—It would still be a war until final victory would come for one side or the other.

AN HOUR of hard work cleared the tracks enough so that the train could move, and the engine was still in working order. With night close at hand, they all swung onto the cars and headed back for camp.

"I'm afraid you won't want to go riding with me any more, Nora," Jeff grinned. "Something seems to happen every time."

"That's what makes it so interesting," Nora returned. "I wouldn't have missed if for anything. And you've certainly got the whole crew behind you now, to the last man. With the other trouble-shooters, nobody has liked or trusted them very much. But after the way you saved so many lives today, they'd willingly die for you, if necessary."

Jeff looked a little uncomfortable at the praise, though he knew it was true enough. Before his coming the camp had been a seething mass of discontent. LeGrande had infiltrated a good proportion of his own men among them, and these had constantly worked to stir up strife, to cause delay. But of late they had been weeded out, mostly by the crew themselves, who had made it so unpleasant for traitors that now that element

was either entirely gone or discreetly keeping still and working as hard as the rest. All of which made a big difference.

By the next morning, Jeff had several sharpshooters up above, men who had kept an alert watch the night before, and this gave confidence to the crew as they went back to work that there would be no repetition of yesterday's near disaster.

Dinny McQuade had worked late the night before and been astir before dawn, with Casey Ryan helping him as zealously, and with hammers, paint and oil and polishing rag, they had gone a long way toward restoring the locomotive to some of its former glory. Casey grinned almost happily as he surveyed it.

"Sure, and the ould girl shows some battle scars, proof that she's a veteran," he confided. "But she runs as swate as iver, and phwat's a black eye if 'tis well earned?"

"You'll be driving the most famous engine on the road from now on, Dinny," Jeff assured him. "And by the way, I'm riding with you this morning. So is Handy Williams here. Handy says he knows you."

"Sure, and how are ye, ye ould horse thief?" Dinny's face lighted at sight of the shambling, horse-faced Handy. " 'Tis near a year since I've clapped eyes on ye. Been in jail?"

"Worse," Handy nodded dejectedly. "Been surveyin'."

HE CLIMBED into the cab along with them, as though about to attend a funeral. He had been chief of the surveying party which had run the final stakes along here a year before, had returned now from other work to see how things looked, as he put it. He dismounted with Jeff at end of steel and they picked their way along on foot, Handy keeping a sharp but jaundiced eye on the operations.

"Nice country to go through with instruments," he sighed. "But after it gets all torc up, it kind of spoils the beauty. Not but what you're doing a good job, and right according to figures." He paused, staring.

They had reached the side-canyon, that one so choked with thorns and brush, up which Jeff and Nora had ridden a half-mile or so a few days before, to come upon Macy and Calhoun in conference.

"What's happened to the creek?" Handy demanded, and pointed. "Ain't enough water in it for a frog to wash his face in."

"No," agreed Jeff. "It's been dry all fall. There was just a trickle when I first came along a few weeks ago. Must be the dry weather."

Handy turned to survey the creek which flowed down Hellgate Canyon itself, shook his head.

"That's darn funny," he declared. "This time last year, that creek was same as it is now. And this'n that's dry now—it was considerable the bigger of the two."

CHAPTER XXIII

Mountain Lake

JEFF swung around, staring at the surveyor, then at the side-canyon in amazement. There was something here which had a sinister sound. He had a tightened feeling of apprehension.

The fact that the side-creek had been just a mere trickle on that day when he had first ridden this way, and had since dried up entirely, had not struck him as anything unusual. This was the low-water time of year, and it had been a drier summer and earlier fall than was usual. Many mountain creeks which would be torrents in spring and early summer were dry courses for the rest of the year.

But if this had been running bigger than Hellgate Creek, a year ago, and Hellgate was normal now for the time of year—that might be worth looking into.

"That's the way of it," Handy Williams added mournfully. "Funny it'd go dry now."

Jeff pulled at his chin, considering.

"I was aiming to climb to the top of the canyon and see how things are set up there," he suggested. "It'll be quite a climb, but ought to be worth it for the view. Then, coming back, we'll circle around and have a look at this side-canyon. I've started to do

that two or three times already, but something has always come up to stop me. Care to come along?"

"Ye're dang tootin'," Handy agreed. "And I can show ye the best way to get to the top, too. Me, I clumb up there a couple times last year, the first time in poorsuit of duty, gettin' kind of a bird's-eye view of this whole country to see could I get a railroad line through here. And the second time I done it because I liked the view."

"Then you're just the man I've been looking for," Jeff chuckled. "Lead the way."

EVEN with an experienced guide, who circled and climbed gradually, it took them better than two hours to get to the top of the canyon. But once up there, as Handy had said, it was a view worth climbing back to see again.

From one point they could look off southward across the foothills and prairie beyond, to where Roam had stood for a brief day of glory, on to Lumpjaw and the far empty horizon. Closer at hand, below them, was the deep gash of Hellgate Canyon, and behind, to the north, were more mountains, rising as though to pierce jagged holes in the sky above.

Up here were the men Jeff had dispatched as guards, perched comfortably at various vantage points about a mile apart, where they could see anything that moved on either side or attempted to approach the canyon. That source of danger seemed to be pretty well under control.

Circling, they headed for a point which would take them into the side-canyon. As they topped a rise and came in sight of it, Handy halted suddenly. A couple of miles away something caught the sun like a giant mirror. A rippling lake of water.

"That wasn't there last year," the surveyor pointed out. "And it's a couple of miles up the side coulee there. Reckon that's what's happened to the creek. Been dammed up, to make a lake. Some pond, too, way it looks from here."

Jeff's face had whitened as the full implications of this came home to him. A big lake, which had been long weeks or even months in the forming, back up that side-canyon. It had the smell of disaster. A lot of things were sudenly becoming clear.

"Let's go have a closer look," he said.

"Might be a good idea—though mebby just a mite late," Handy conceded.

They dropped lower as they threaded their way through this country where travel was an effort at nearly every step of the way, both men silent and alert.

Jeff knew that, at long last, he had discovered LeGrande's secret weapon, which the gambler had assured Jeff would wipe out all chances of victory which the Northern might have, regardless of how fast they managed to push the track-laying.

THINGS which had been obscure, which had troubled him before, were clear enough now. This was why his horse had been shot from under him that first day when he had started to circle so as to drop into this side-canyon and follow it back to the Hellgate. He had wondered then why the attack was not followed up, but now he understood. Just so that he was stopped from finding this lake was all that they had really cared about at the time, and the killing of his horse had effectually turned him back.

More to the point, it had been contrived in such a way as not to excite his suspicion about this side-canyon.

The place was well guarded by nature. Almost impassable barriers of twisting coulees, steep hills covered by trees and thorns were everywhere around it. Few people would venture far up here unless they had to.

They reached the canyon itself again, just below the point where he and Nora had ridden and where they had been halted by overhearing that conference between Calhoun and Dave Macy. Here, going in single file, they followed that narrow, brush-bordered path, kept heading on up. Save for short clear spaces, it was tough going most of the time.

Another half a mile, and a tall, roughly garbed figure lounged on a rock in the sunshine, rifle held loosely

across his knees. One glance was enough to tell Jeff that he had already heard them coming, but he did not appear hostile. As they stepped out into the open, he stood up and grinned at them, rifle held loosely in the crook of his arm.

"Well, dog my cats, ef'n it ain't Jeff Boone," he commented affably. "Lookin' for somethin', Mr Boone?"

"You might call it that," Jeff agreed, watching warily.

The guard waved a hand negligently.

"Been sort of expectin' yuh," he confided. "Well, yuh shore come at the right time. Boss has said that if yuh showed up, to let yuh go right ahead and have a look. If yuh'd got along a few days earlier, or anybody else come snoopin'—well, that'd of been a diff'rent story. But way it is now, yuh can do all the lookin' yuh want."

"You're boss is LeGrande, I suppose?"

"Yuh ain't such a bad guesser at that. Here, I'll show yuh the best way. Kind of tough goin', 'less yuh know how. And don't worry. There's other guards been on watch from other directions, but they've all been took off since yesterday. Way things are, ain't no call for us tuh get hostile."

JEFF FOLLOWED, still alert, but he had a pretty good notion that the guard was telling the truth. LeGrande had had time for what he wanted to accomplish, and now it was set as he wanted it. So thoroughly set that his confidence was complete in the workability of his scheme. And as they rounded another turn, Jeff admitted grimly to himself that maybe the gambler had reason for his feeling.

Here the canyon narrowed abruptly to a point not over fifty feet wide, and the walls on either side, like those of Hellgate below, were solid rock, rising to considerable heights. Down through here, in years past, the creek had picked its way.

But in this narrow neck a tremendous overhang from above had been blasted down, filling the gorge from side to side with a dam now more than a hundred feet high. Below the dam the creek bed was dry. Up above was the new lake which they had seen from the distance—a lake which now came to within only a few feet of the top of the dam, and stretched serenely back up the canyon for over half a mile.

Behind the dam the canyon had swiftly widened out, and one glance was enough to tell Jeff that it was a lake of no mean proportions, that a lot of water was impounded here. As Handy Williams had said, this stream must be a big one.

And with the water stored here, LeGrande had a powerful, a devastating weapon in his hands. One which it had been expedient to guard jealously while the lake was filling to near the top of the dam. But now that that point had been reached, it needed no more guarding.

If a charge of dynamite was put in there, to rip out a hole in the dam, the pressure of the lake would soon sweep the whole barrier away. And that vast body of water would push past stones and brush along the choked gorge as though they didn't exist.

It would reach Hellgate Canyon in a wall fifty feet high, filling the Hellgate from wall to wall, pouring on down and out, against the town of Hellgate, set there so close to the mouth of the canyon. LeGrande must have chuckled when he saw where the new town was set. That was probably more luck than he had dared to hope for.

For such a flood would take the town as well. But, regardless of the town, it would tear out everything in its path down through the canyon —track and grade and everything else. The Northern would be finished.

Jeff stared, his face a little gray. No wonder LeGrande had been confident. The other harassments had been designed primarily to keep Jeff busy so that he couldn't find time to go poking around in the hills, though, with sharpshooters constantly on watch, men who would shoot from ambush without warning, the secret had been pretty safe, and rendered

doubly so by its location.

The guard, lounging easily and leaning on his rifle, muzzle on the ground, grinned and waved an easy hand.

"Look around all yuh want to," he invited. "She's yourn now. In fact, if yuh don't like the durn thing, LeGrande said yuh could set a charge of dynamite and blow it out, for all he cared."

CHAPTER XXIV

Joker In The Deck

HANDY WILLIAMS, Jeff had discovered, was a taciturn man. Now he preserved that silence, looking longer-faced than usual but with no helpful suggestion. Viewing the dam and the lake above it, Jeff could understand his silence. LeGrande felt that he had them licked here, and Jeff had a strong hunch that he might be more than half right.

That sardonic suggestion that, if they didn't like the dam there, they were at liberty to blast it out—that was grim and salty humor. A blast might have been set at any time in the last two or three days by LeGrande, and so have accomplished his purpose, exactly as he had threatened. Had he done so, nothing could have saved the railroad through the canyon, or the Spur itself, and, in the long run, the Northern.

With that weapon in his hand, LeGrande had hesitated to use it—partly, perhaps, because he figured it as being fool-proof in any case, partly because he wanted Jeff to see what was coming, in advance, so as to have a chance to gloat. But there would have been another and stronger reason, and the guard's next remark showed it.

"Better move yore town without wastin' much time—and get yore crew out of the canyon," he advised. "We don't aim tuh tamper with this none—but yuh can see for yoreself that it won't last here more'n another day or so 'fore something happens, and mebby not that long."

That was LeGrande's real trump card, the joker in the deck against which it seemed there was no way to fight. From up above the creek, still full-flowing as it had been a year before, continued to pour its current into the lake, steadily raising the level of it, inch by creeping inch, increasing the pressure against the water-soaked dam with every passing hour.

It might continue to hold until the water started spilling over the top, or it might break through before that, as the guard suggested. The difference would be only a matter of hours, in any case.

The certainty of that happening had induced LeGrande to wait, saving himself from a possible charge of wholesale murder if he should trap the whole railroad crew in the canyon, or, just about as bad, sleeping men in the town just below its mouth. The damage to the tracks in the canyon would be more than ample for his purpose.

JEFF FELT as though he were growing gray while he stared at that placid lake there. The inevitable might be postponed for a few days, or even weeks, by getting a crew in there and building the dam higher with sandbags—but there were two potent arguments against that.

In the first place, the water had to go down the canyon sooner or later, since there was nowhere else for it to go. And the more that was impounded, the greater would be the destruction when it finally started.

The second reason was even more convincing. If he tried to get a crew in there to do anything, LeGrande would sharply challenge the issue with a crew of gunmen, meanwhile setting off a blast to tear the whole dam out.

"Shore looks like yuh're between the devil and the deep bloo sea," Handy remarked. "And whichever way you jump, it's the same result."

"That's about the size of it," the guard nodded genially. "And now, though I ain't one to pester with advice, still if I was you, I'd be gettin' yore crew out of the canyon and movin' that town kind of tuh one side,

as well. We ain't aimin' to hurry nature none, but even at that, yuh might not have much leeway."

"We'll be doing that," Jeff agreed. Tight-lipped, he turned, led the way back down the canyon. The guard strolled along with them, still with the rifle held loosely in the crook of his arm, chatting amiably on what fine weather they were having. Reaching the point where he had met them, he halted, waving a cheerful good-bye.

"It's been pleasant meetin' yuh," he assured them. "Always glad of comp' ny."

For another half-mile they went ahead in silence, then, deep in the brush-shrouded canyon and not far from the Hellgate itself, Jeff halted.

"You go ahead," he instructed Handy. "Clear the crew out of the canyon—it's close to quitting time anyway. And have them get busy, right away, moving the town back down the line another mile. We can't afford to take any chances."

"I'll do that," the surveyor agreed. "But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to circle back up that way for another look—and this one won't be an escorted tour."

"Which means they'll shoot you in the back, if they catch you snoopin'," Williams observed dourly. "But you're the boss. Only watch yore step."

He went on ahead, and Jeff turned, losing himself quickly in the dense brush at the side of the canyon. It was a stiff climb to get out of it, but he finally managed it, then, circling, keeping to such cover as was available and going cautiously, he started back up again. He was in full agreement with Handy's opinion that a bullet would be his reception if he were caught snooping.

DUSK WAS falling now, which helped. Darkness settled, lightened by a half-moon, and faint golden stars, as he circled well above the lake itself. Now he could look down into the canyon and see the creek, still pouring its weight down to the lake, running full and strong. He kept along up it with dogged patience, a mile, two miles—and halted suddenly.

The creek ran here, coming down in a series of sharp falls and rapids from higher up in the hills. And at this particular point, before it entered the head of the long canyon, it had once been at a cross-roads where, with little persuasion, it could have turned either to the right or the left. It had taken the left turning, but a couple of hours' work by half a dozen men with picks and shovels would open up the other route to drain it away to the right.

Convinced of this, Jeff lost no time in starting back. Every hour was precious now, and the fact of turning the creek would not solve the problem by any means. There would still be the lake itself, with plenty of water in it to create all the havoc necessary if the dam was blasted out. But if the creek was turned, it would not continue to raise the water level, and the danger of washing over the top would be ended.

With that done, there might be several hours, even a day or so of leeway before LeGrande discovered that the creek had ceased to flow down to the lake. And every hour of grace was that much to the good, giving them a fighting chance. Also, a nebulous plan was beginning to take shape in Jeff's mind. One which might stand a chance, but only if the lake was no longer fed steadily.

The half-moon had vanished behind the hills by the time he reached the dam again. This time, taking advantage of the thick cover of darkness, he was coming straight down the canyon, after circling the lake. It was not a good trail, but it was a lot better than off through the surrounding hills. And tonight, if his hunch was correct, a very careless watch would be kept, if any was kept at all.

RASPING SNORES, which made up in volume what they might have lacked in melody, guided him to a lean-to where a glance showed him two men rolled in their blankets. A careful look around failed to disclose anyone on guard, and Jeff moved on, dropped down to the foot of the dam itself.

For two thirds of the way down from the top, as his look that afternoon had told him, the barrier was mostly made up of dirt and small stone—stuff which would wash away in a hurry once a breach was started. But at the bottom it was set on a foundation of heavier stone which had been toppled from the original overhang. Searching among this, in the gloom, was a thankless job, but luck was with him. Presently he stopped, eyes gleaming.

Here, carefully placed, was a heavy charge of dynamite, with cap and fuse attached. All ready, in case of emergency, to be set off in a hurry.

A few minutes of further inspection convinced Jeff that there were no other charges anywhere. This one, in this spot, should do the work with power to spare. Working swiftly, he removed the dynamite, leaving the set, to any casual inspection, the same as before. This might be the joker in LeGrande's deck—a joker he wouldn't suspect.

With dynamite to work with, Jeff retraced his steps up the canyon again, above the lake. He was tired—dog-tired, after a hard day of tramping and climbing, but this was no time for rest. He had to chance it that somebody might hear the blast, but with waterfalls close at hand making a steady roar of sound, and the guards at the dam several miles away and asleep, it was worth risking. The dynamite would do the work of several men, and do it now, saving precious hours.

He set the blast, watched the result, and restrained a whoop. Already the stream was turning. In five minutes it had all swung into the new channel. Later, if they liked, it could be turned back to its old course, but that menace was stopped now.

The guards were still sleeping when Jeff repassed them again. Two hours before dawn, staggering with weariness, he reached the place where Hellgate had been a town the morning before. But now it had moved, during the afternoon and evening, another mile back down the track. Another mile to walk.

CHAPTER XXV

The Great Gamble

THE COOKS were sleepily astir as Jeff limped into end of steel, though the rest of the camp still slept. Jeff sank into a chair and ordered the surprised hash-slingers to bring him a big meal in a hurry, and he proceeded to eat voraciously, with his boots kicked off and his feet at rest. Half a dozen cups of black coffe made a big difference, and then, as the camp started to stir for a new day's activity, he was ready for another one himself.

He issued swift orders, instructions which sent Dinny McQuade and Casey Ryan with their engine and an empty freight car racing back down the new tracks and toward Lumpaw at a perilous speed for such a road bed.

A dozen saddled horses were loaded onto a flat, and another engine was ready to pull this and a crew of men up the canyon, Jeff with them, and all armed with rifles and six-shooters—and, what was more to the point, these were men who knew how to use the guns.

With feet still protesting, but thankful that today he would be in the saddle, Jeff turned toward the waiting car, halted as Nora came running toward him. She eyed him anxiously.

"Jeff!" she said. "I just heard about your getting back only an hour ago. And now you're starting out again!"

Jeff managed a grin.

"Nora, I reckon you'll think I'm plumb undependable," he confessed: "Here I was supposed to get back and go riding with you—and this is the way I keep my promises. I wouldn't blame you none for getting mad at me."

Oh, Jeff!" Her voice was reproachful. "You know I'm not mad at you. But you can't keep going all the time—not without some rest. And Handy told us all about that dam. Now you're going back up there to fight for it—" Her eyes ranged quickly over the arsenal which each man

carried. "Jeff, promise me you'll be careful."

"Why, that's all I ever am, Nora darlin'," Jeff said shocked. "That's what I'm being now, taking a dozen men where I really wouldn't need half that many. But anything to be on the safe side."

She came close to him, put her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were impelling.

"Jeff, I do want you to be careful—and I know how desperate a fight you have on your hands. Even if you do drive LeGrande's guards away, the water will still be there. And it might come breaking loose at any moment now—while you're in the canyon, on the train—"

"Nora, you're a railroader, and a fighter," Jeff reminded her. "And right now we're building a railroad."

She straightened, flashed a rather forced smile at him.

"You're right, Jeff," she agreed. "Go on. But oh—it's hard to wait, at this end."

HE SWUNG onto the flat car, sat down and waved as the little train pulled away and headed for the mountains ahead.

But Jeff was whistling cheerfully between his teeth as they rolled along. This was a lot better than walking. A few minutes later, just above the side-canyon, where the train would be safe if anything did happen, they unloaded, and Jeff swung into the saddle with a really restful sigh. This was something like again.

Following that thorn-choked trail where he and Nora had ridden before, they came out into the broader canyon where the going was easier, raced up it, entered the narrower, brush-clogged trail again and kept steadily ahead, a grim, alert crew who were ready for whatever might lie ahead.

At the point where the guard had met them the day before there was no one in sight today, but when, a little later, they came in sight of the dam itself, Jeff was not surprised to see that a crew about equal in size to his own was waiting there. Among them, looking as unruffled as ever, was LeGrande himself.

Naturally, after their discovery of the lake and the dam the day before, LeGrande would be here with a good crew on guard today. Jeff had counted on that in bringing his own crew along. But had LeGrande discovered either of the jokers which Jeff had slipped into his stacked deck during the night? His impassive face told nothing.

Jeff pulled up, his crew lounging easy in the saddle just behind him, but warily alert for all that appearance of indolence. LeGrande nodded as though he had been expecting them.

"That's one thing this country lacked before," he commented, as though continuing a conversation. "A lake. Nothing any prettier, anywhere, than a little jewel of a lake. Sure makes a great attraction."

"It does that," Jeff agreed. "It's a pity, LeGrande, that you didn't figure in all the factors, so that you could be sure of keeping your lake permanently."

"You can overdo even a good thing," the gambler retorted. "Though maybe I was a mite careless. Time the water gets a little higher, it's apt to wash this dam out of its own accord."

Jeff breathed a little easier. LeGrande hadn't been at the upper end of the lake this morning, to find that the creek had quit pouring its waters into it. Which argued that he hadn't investigated that charge of dynamite today, either. Though, on the other hand, it would be just like him, if he did know, to take this line and, when something started, to set off that dynamite as a grim surprise for Jeff. Which would be playing his trump with a vengeance.

"Why all the reception committee?" Jeff asked.

LeGrande's grin was brief and wintry.

"JUST TO make sure that you let nature take its course," he said. "I'm willing to do that—but you have to do the same thing. Building up the dam a little would save your railroad for a few days, Boone, but in the end it all comes out the same.

You may as well realize that you're licked and take it."

"Maybe," Jeff agreed. "Maybe not. You've got some good men here, LeGrande, and if a fight starts, somebody's going to get hurt. Personal, I'd rather avoid that, for the sake of everybody."

"You can—by getting away from here and keeping away."

"We aren't going to do that. You may be right in what you say—that this dam will go out sooner or later of its own weight. In which case, if you're so certain, it should't make any difference to you. But I aim to stop it as long as I can."

"Looking for trouble, you mean? If you are, we're all set."

"That's what I mean, LeGrande. I'm giving you one minute to make up your mind."

The gambler shrugged.

"You're good at setting time limits, Boone. But they get damned monotonous. This time, I'm calling your bluff. Start something now and the dam goes out right then and there. You can't stop it."

He wasn't bluffing. Down below, only two or three steps from the place where the dynamite had been set, Jeff could glimpse a man, waiting. Someone who had been sent down there as soon as they rode into sight, who was standing ready to light the fuse. He was sheltered behind other rocks so that he could not be stopped by a bullet.

This was showdown at last. With a fight inevitable, and no way of being sure who held the joker. Both men figured they had outguessed the other. Jeff's face was as masklike as the gambler's.

"Time's up, LeGrande."

LeGrande's arm lifted in swift signal, and down below the man moved. But no one, as yet, had reached for a gun. All at once the man down there was in sight, running hard, scrambling across the broken rubble, reaching the edge of the coulee and starting to climb fast. LeGrande's voice held an edge of triumph.

"There's a fuse lit down there, Boone. Better not start trouble up here—it can't change things any now."

The faces of Jeff's crew were white and strained, their breathing suddenly audible in the silence. But Jeff sat his own horse and waited while the seconds ticked off. That fuse had been fairly short—judged to give the man who lit in time enough to reach safety, but not much more than that, as an insurance against interference. He had already reached a place of safety.

Five seconds more—ten, and Jeff detected mounting anxiety in the faces of the men behind LeGrande, even a glint of disquiet in the eyes of the gambler. His own voice was quiet.

"I lifted those sticks of dynamite out of there last night, LeGrande—and it looks as though no one had noticed the difference. Better throw down your guns and give us the field in peace. Do that, and you can travel out of here and go where you please."

But LeGrande, sudden rage blasting his icy calm, was of no mind to do that. By holding the dam he could still set another charge of dynamite. Cursing, he reached for his gun, in a motion smooth as that of a striking rattlesnake, and as fast.

CHAPTER XXVI

Barrel By Mule-Back

BUT THE failure of that expected blast to go off, the sudden knowledge that Jeff had beaten them there, had shaken his crew, and though LeGrande was ready to fight, his men were a fraction slow in following him into action. Whereas Jeff's own men, heartened by the sudden discovery of what their boss had done, were ready and swinging into gun-smoking action as speedily as LeGrande himself.

Jeff's own gun was out to match LeGrande's, they seemed to leap up into the air together, glinting in the sun, to blast like the sound of one shot. Jeff heard the whistle of the bullet close by his head, but his own shot had been a scant fraction the

faster, just enough to deflect the gambler's aim.

His bullet, aimed for the heart, had been deflected as well, by the gambler's rising gun. Jeff saw the gun drop, spinning, to the ground, while LeGrande raved shrilly and spun his horse about, digging in the spurs and following a trail off at right angles. Weaponless, his hand numb from the impact of the big bullet which had torn his gun from his hand, LeGrande had no stomach to face Jeff's belching gun if he could help it.

Seeing him turn, his own crew were turning with him, anxious to be out of a fight which was not at all to their taste. Two of them had been wounded in that first exchange of lead, and a few swift jumps of their horses carried them over the hill and out of sight.

Jeff made no attempt to follow. While he remained alive, LeGrande was dangerous, and if he had been killed or made a prisoner, it would have improved the situation vastly. But you couldn't shoot a man in the back, more particularly if he was unarmed. Jeff had aimed to make good on his threat to be rid of him, in that exchange of shots, but luck had been with the gambler.

To pursue them wouldn't do at all. Someone would sneak back and set a fresh charge of dynamite if they were given half a chance. Now that he had a chance to get control of the dam, he didn't dare miss it.

He issued swift orders, placing men where they could keep a sharp watch from all danger points. A glance at the dam itself was none too reassuring. The water was a full foot higher than when he had first been there the day before, and the whole upper third of the mud dam looked to be well soaked and dangerously soft. Even without more water being poured in by the creek, there was a tremendous pressure behind it—and sooner or later—perhaps in a few days, but very possibly a matter of hours or even of minutes—unless that pressure was relieved, the dam would collapse.

In which case, LeGrande would still have won.

"LOOKS MEAN, Jeff." Bill Luby ejected a brown flood of tobacco juice and removed his hat to mop his onion-like cranium with a blue bandanna. "Won't be long with that creek pourin' water in, I'm afraid."

"That part won't bother, Bill." Jeff explained what he had done to turn the creek the night before. Bill replaced his hat and stared admiringly.

"You sure played the dangedest trick on them," he conceded. "One way and another, I'm inclined to think yuh'll lick 'em yet—providin' yuh can solve this here proposition, Jeff. Even with the creek stopped, the pressure'll take it 'fore long. And how'n tunket can yuh do it? Start a little stream anywhere, and it won't stay a little stream long, to take it down easy. It'll bust the whole thing out.

That was true enough. And it would be out of the question to hold it there until the water-level dropped to a safe point of its own accord. That would take weeks, or months, and they had days—or hours.

"Maybe we'll lick it yet," Jeff suggested. "You boys stay here and keep watch, and don't even spit in the lake. Bill, you come with me."

They swung on their horses again, started back down the canyon. By the time they reached its mouth and the railroad track again, Dinny McQuade was just rolling his own train into place, having not only made a record run to Lumpjaw and return, but having secured and loaded the necessary freight in hardly more than nothing flat. Now the main crew had come with him.

Jeff set them swiftly to work unloading the freight car. It was full—of whiskey barrels. Fifty-gallon whiskey barrels, strongly made, well bound with iron hoops, and in good condition. Jeff had noticed a big supply of them, all empty, in Lumpjaw, on numerous occasions.

There was no road up this thorn-choked side canyon, but the mules

had been brought up now, and several more or less expert packers were swiftly tying two barrels on each mule, starting them on the trip up-canyon, with axemen clearing out the worst of the trail ahead. Besides the barrels, there were the railroad carpenters with tools, a barrel of pitch, and all the tents which had been in use during the summer.

These were stained and weathered, but still in good shape. Only a couple of days before they had been struck and folded, with wooden bunkhouses provided for the extra crew members, since, with the nights already chilly and winter marching down from the north, it would be impossible to shelter the crew in tents much longer. Now, if Jeff had figured right, those tents would come in handy.

Tents, carpenters, pitch and several barrels arrived at the dam almost together. Jeff had spread his guards well back and reinforced their numbers, to prevent any enemy getting close enough to throw a dynamite bomb out on the dam. If LeGrande thought of that and managed it, it would gouge a hole and still ruin everything.

Everyone had a puzzled look as this varied equipment began to arrive, but Jeff explained.

"Cut those tents into strips. Then double them about six or eight thicknesses, a foot wide, and nail that around the ends of two barrels—with the heads and ends knocked out of the barrels. Use pitch on the inside of the canvas, and that will hold the barrels together, water-tight but flexible. And we'll soon have a long pipe of barrels."

He turned to one of his engineers, on whose face comprehension was beginning to dawn.

"Chuck, we're going to have a siphon here. Your job is to see that the water siphons through."

"I'll handle that," Chuck agreed. "You've sure got a head on you, Jeff. Whiskey barrels to make a pipe to siphon a lake over a dam!"

WITH A big crew working and the car load of barrels coming along steadily, the pipe lengthened fast. It had to be long enough to reach over the dam and nearly to the bottom on both sides, but by a little after noon, it was in place—and working. A cheer went up from the assembled crew as the water started to gush through in a pouring stream.

"Lot of pressure going through that, with the whole lake pushing to get out," the engineer said, surveying it anxiously. "But that canvas, as thick as it is, is as strong as the barrels, I guess—and it seems to be holding."

Jeff drew a slow breath of relief. That had worried him, too, but his improvised pipe was carrying it. The water wasn't going out half as fast as the creek had poured it in, but it was a pretty good stream, and with no fresh supply of water entering the lake, it would slowly, if surely, lower the level, finally draining it past the danger point.

There was still plenty to worry about. Every minute now found a gradual lowering of the lake, a slight easing of the mighty pressure of the water. But it was so gradual as scarcely to be noticeable, and the main pressure on the dam would continue with hardly a let-up for at least a couple of days yet. If it held out that long—

After that they could feel reasonably safe. Until then there was nothing more that could be done here. Lumpjaw had been denuded of its whiskey barrels. No others could be rounded up and brought here in time to do any real good with a second siphon.

It was still unsafe to work in the canyon, but most of the work had been finished there, so that the crew could go ahead deeper in the mountains, still burrowing at the tunnel and all the other jobs which waited. Leaving plenty of men on guard at the dam, Jeff dispatched the others to routine tasks and returned to the slightly unstable town of Hellgate.

In his own car he slept for a couple of hours, rousing again at the supper call. Nora looked at his reddened eyes and unshaven face and shook her head.

"You look as if you needed a lot

more sleep, Jeff," she said. "You can't keep going all the time."

"Sleep's a fine thing, but it's against my policy to miss meals when I can help it," Jeff grinned. "Any news from up canyon?"

"Nothing. All the men are talking about how you did the impossible, Jeff." Nora's eyes were shining. "Speaking of supper, I've made pie—and you're eating with me. Dad hasn't got back yet."

Jeff rasped a hand across his chin and nodded.

"If you can stand it to look across the table at a porcupine, I'll sure go for that pie," he agreed.

Dusk was falling outside again, the days growing rapidly shorter now, which would be one more thing to contend with in this battle against time. Jeff pushed back his empty plate, smothered a yawn and stood up. As he did so, something seemed to fall against the door outside.

A man lay in a heap at the foot of the caboose steps, where he had collapsed. Jeff lifted him, sucked in his breath sharply at sight of that pale face, the half dried, half fresh blood which stained the shirt front of Dave Macy. He carried him inside the car, conscious of Nora's suddenly white face, laid him on a cot, and Macy's eyes fluttered open. For a moment he stared blankly, then recognition returned, and he strove to raise to an elbow.

"Jeff," he gasped. "LeGrande—there's a secret tunnel, to the top of the cliffs, on the right side—he's going to really blast the hill loose and choke the canyon tonight. He's had it all set for weeks. I—tried to make it sooner—they tried to stop me—"

He gasped and choked. Nora was bending over him, but her voice was imperative.

"Hurry, Jeff—but please be careful!"

CHAPTER XXVII

Hellgate Below

HE MIGHT have guessed at something of the sort, Jeff reflected bitterly, as he bent low in the saddle and urged his horse to greater speed. A man like LeGrande was not the sort to have only one trump up his sleeve.

There had been no time for Jeff to look over those miles of ledges, along the canyon's crest, with real thoroughness. The men he had placed on guard up above had made an inspection, but a lot of it was rough country at best; some hidden passage along which a man might creep unobserved was not at all impossible. And there were plenty of places where the whole side of the canyon might have been mined with not one but a dozen or a hundred charges of high explosive.

Macy had said that this had been done, and that LeGrande was going back to set them off tonight. If he succeeded in getting there first and settng it off—then the canyon would be blocked so that it would take weeks or even months to clean it out again. And a few days' delay at this stage would finish the Northern.

Darkness lay here in the depths of the Hellgate like a choking blanket. His horse's hoofs rang loud on the road bed, echoing back ghostily from the sides. Nothing else stirred.

Overhead the walls seemed to crowd together, as though about to topple. Which was not entirely imagination on his part, for if LeGrande got there first, they might come shattering down at any moment. LeGrande was going, alone, Macy had said. So, tonight, Jeff rode alone as well. He had always been one to ride alone—and he always would, he reflected bitterly.

For, tonight, Dave Macy had redeemed himself. Knowing himself despised, an outcast, he had revolted at what the gambler planned to do, for the thing was monstrous. And had taken a bad wound in escaping to bring the news.

Despite that, he had kept coming. Maybe it was better that way. There was a lot of good in him, and he was the man Nora loved. That forced cheerfulness on her part these last few days, while the hurt lay deep in her eyes—it had wrenched at Jeff's heart to see it.

HE SPURRED with unintentional savagery. Now the side canyon was reached, and though he could see nothing, he could hear a good-sized stream running down the long-dry watercourse. After holding all these hours, the dam would probably be all right now. But that victory meant nothing if this last fight was lost. He rode, straining his ears for what would be an earth-shaking explosion when it came.

If it came. He was up among the stars now, which was like coming back to life from the gloom of the pit. It wasn't far to the place Macy had described to him, where a cluster of boulders stood, and among them was the beginning of a hidden passage, following a crack in the ground, then to a little cave-like tunnel for nearly a hundred feet more—

Here it was. No wonder they hadn't found it. Unless you knew it was there, a man might pass within a dozen feet, even by daylight, and not guess at it. LeGrande had probably stumbled upon it while prowling around, and had saved this for his last trump card, to be used only if his others failed.

Jeff followed, and here was the tunnel, dark as the canyon bottom, but with a faint glow of light showing ahead. He came out of it, stopped. High overhead were the stars, down below was the utter gloom of the canyon, though the darkness masked that sheer drop of a thousand feet. Step ahead another half-dozen paces, and there was the drop.

It was fifty feet to the top of the canyon here, and this place was really a pocket, or cavern, back inside the ledge, invisible from up above, the extension of that natural tunnel formation. It widened out to about a hundred feet, and it was here that numerous charges of dynamite had been set.

Jeff could see the possibilities. Rightly placed, enough could be torn loose to clog the canyon below. And the fact that, following this trail, he had reached here without being seen by any of his own guards, was proof of its secrecy. But it looked as if he had beaten LeGrande—

The scrape of a hob-nailed boot on the rock warned him, and Jeff spun about. Off there at the side was LeGrande, staring at him in equal surprise. He had been first, after all, but evidently he had been sure of plenty of time, had stopped to take a look and make sure that everything was in good working order before setting off his fuses.

Surprised or not, something had warned him. Now he had a leveled revolver, and his voice came sardonically.

"If you feel like trying for your gun, Boone, go right ahead. Otherwise—take it easy by two fingers and toss it out over there!"

FOR A moment, Jeff stood rigid. Just what LeGrande might have in mind, he did not know, but of one thing he was certain as that day would follow night: LeGrande did not intend that he should leave here alive.

But to accept the invitaton and grab for his gun would mean being shot down without a chance. LeGrande had some other scheme in mind for his end, one not so pleasant as a bullet, but he wouldn't be squeamish if it came to necessity. Jeff obeyed, lifting his gun easy and tossing it out into the void below. It left him weaponless, but it gave him at least a little longer to live.

"Looks as if Macy must have got through," the gambler went on. "I figured he'd never make it. But since you were fool enough to come alone, it doesn't matter."

Still holding his gun in one hand, LeGrande backed a few paces, to the side of the hill, reached down and picked up something with his free hand. As he advanced slowly again and shook it out, Jeff saw that it was a lariat.

"I could shoot you, and if necessary I certainly will," LeGrande went on. "But though I'm a gambler, Boone, I never was one to take unnecessary chances. I've had this fixed up for a long while now, but I preferred not to use it, except as a last resort. It will make so much of a mess to be cleaned up before the others can build their line through. And I could shoot you, but I can get away with less

trouble if I just tie you up and leave you here."

Jeff saw his plan now. Just to tie him up and leave him there—and when the series of blasts started, that would be all that was necessary. He felt the sweat starting on him, though it was chilly up here.

Actually, of course, that was as quick and as easy a way to die as a bullet, and it would make little difference between going off with some thousands of tons of rock and dirt in the blast, to plunging down for a thousand feet and then have all that pile itself on top of him. But somehow the thought of being tied up, helpless, waiting for that sort of thing to happen—

He could see in LeGrande's malicious eyes that he understood how he would feel, which was his principal reason for choosing this method. His poker face and iron self-control stood the gambler in good stead, but now and then a gleam of the real man underneath broke through, to show the all-consuming hatred he felt for the one man who had somehow managed to thwart him at every turn. This time he aimed to taste his revenge to the last drop in the cup.

STILL holding the gun with one hand, and never taking his eyes off Jeff, he was shaking out the lariat with the other, working the noose open. He did it rather clumsily. With the cards he was an artist, and those long, slender fingers never made a bungle. But a rope was foreign to him, and working one-handed placed him at a disadvantage.

Now he had the loop ready. He advanced slowly, holding it.

"Put your hands together," he snapped. "And hold out your wrists."

Jeff tensed. Slowly he obeyed, conscious of that forbidding gun-muzzle upon him every moment. LeGrande was taking no chances that way. He held out his hands, watching warily. But the gambler, with the swift dexterity of the card-sharp, thrust the noose suddenly over them and had it tight in a single pull.

As he did so, Jeff lunged back, jerking hard.

He had hoped to loosen the rope, and throw it off in that jerk, and he was staking everything upon that one desperate play. Up here there was some moonlight, as well as the stars, enough to see fairly well, but that black pit at the edge looked doubly dark by contrast.

To jerk back, away from LeGrande, in the instant when he would least expect it, might work where to lunge at him would be sure to bring a bullet. And though the noose was smooth enough, Jeff's glance had seen that the rest of the coiled lariat was in a tangle.

Things happened fast. He had rather counted on a shot, but there was none. His surprise move, as he had hoped, had caught LeGrande partly off guard, jerking him forward as well—toward that outer rim of darkness. LeGrande tried frantically to jerk back, arms swinging wildly, feet as well. He was at the disadvantage which Jeff had worked for, but all at once the play had gone beyond the control of either of them.

Jeff saw LeGrande, clawing wildly, stumble, teeter for a moment and go over the edge. The rope about his own wrists was still tight, and despite his efforts to loosen it, it jerked viciously, yanking him forward. As he fell, LeGrande had tangled in the lariat, and in falling, he was jerking Jeff along with him, over the edge.

He was falling—with only a thousand feet of sheer space below him. The next instant, with a jerk which seemed almost to tear out his arms, they had been lifted high above his head, and Jeff found himself swinging in space, the rope holding his wrists tightly together. Half a dozen feet away from him, but about on a level with his own body, he could see that LeGrande was hanging and swinging as well.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Square-Shooter

AS THE pain of that fierce jerk lessened, Jeff looked around, trying to figure out what had happened. Then he saw, in part. Caught off balance by his jerk, sud-

denly terrorized by the depths ahead, LeGrande had lost his head, had tangled in the rope and gone over, pulling Jeff after him. But Jeff had fallen to one side, and the lariat had caught near the middle, over a projecting thumb of rock there at the side. Now they each hung some ten feet below the ledge, swinging like pendulums above the pit.

"LeGrande!" Jeff said sharply.

There was no answer. Looking closer in the gloom, Jeff felt a little chill race along his spine, and he understood the silence. Somehow that tangle of rope had shifted in the fall, from LeGrande's feet, upward. It had formed a noose of its own, and this was now about LeGrande's throat. Already the man was dead, whether from a broken neck or strangulation Jeff could not tell.

He had told LeGrande that he was a man born to hang, but this grim reality was shocking and terrible. And then the realization of his own predicament swept over him.

If LeGrande had still been alive, his fear of the depths below would have made him work with Jeff long enough for them to get out of this new situation again, and, working together, they might have done so. But with LeGrande dead, there on the other end of the rope, and hanging with his own hands tied together, drawn taut by the double weight on the rope, how was he ever to get out? Even if his hands had been free for climbing, would not the rope slip as he went upward?

It was a cold sweat which broke out on him now. Hanging that way was painful, numbing his arms. Whatever was to be done had to be done soon. He raised his voice, shouting for help, listened. There was no answer.

That was easy to understand. The guards would be pretty well back from the edge of the canyon, up on vantage points where they could see better, and there was no one very close here in any case. The chance of their hearing him was remote, and even if they did, the chance of reaching him in time to do anything was even more so. For with that cavern-like shelf, he was sixty feet below the top of the canyon ledge.

Jeff's jaw clenched. Either he'd get up, or take the drop in trying. There was just one way to go about it that he could see, and he deliberately started to swinging back and forth, like a pendulum.

THE MOTION on the rope started LeGrande to swinging as well. And for once, luck was with him. LeGrande swung toward him at the moment of his own swing inward. Jeff swung his legs out, caught the form of the gambler and wrapped them around him, edging them up above the shoulders and around the neck.

It was an awkward position to maintain, but for the moment it eased the strain on his wrists. Now came a desperate battle. His hands were above the taut noose, and with them he could grasp the rope that led up. Setting his teeth, he took an iron grip on it with his right hand, began working with his left to loosen the noose, which was so tight that it had cut deeply into the flesh.

He had to sustain the double weight of LeGrande and himself with that grip of his right hand, and work the noose loose with his left. And he had to do it on the first try. Failure, a stop to rest, would tighten it as hard as ever, leaving him too weak for more effective work.

Now the sweat was coming out on his face in earnest, but he felt the rope relax a little, then he wriggled his left hand free. In a vast surge of relief he reached up and held the rope with it, pulled his right hand out, and paused to rest for a moment.

There was another element of luck in his favor. The darkness which lay so thick below. If he could see those sheer depths of Hellgate, he doubted if he could fight to climb that half-dozen feet remaining. But he couldn't see below.

All that he had to do now was to climb up, holding both ropes to prevent their slipping. After what had gone before, that was relatively easy. He dragged himself over the edge of the shelf, rested there a minute, still holding the ropes tight to prevent

LeGrande from slipping. Then, turned around and with feet firmly braced, he drew the body of the gambler up to safety. Even with a man like LeGrande, he didn't want to see him take that drop. The mere thought of it had been LeGrande's undoing.

Standing up, a little shakily, Jeff looked around, then went back through the tunnel and outside again. He shouted for one of the guards, and when one arrived, they worked together for nearly an hour, tracing out the various charges of dynamite and removing them. With LeGrande dead, there wasn't much danger here, but it was just as well to be on the safe side.

There was enough high explosive, once it was gathered together, to blow down a thousand tons of rock. Jeff breathed easier. Then he walked back to his horse, swung into the saddle, and turned at an easy jog trot back for end of steel.

THE TOWN was dark and silent when he arrived. It was already midnight, and it had been a hard day —or was it two or three of them? Jeff's mind felt foggy tonight. He stumbled across to his own car, pulled off his boots and was asleep before he hit the blankets.

Jeff awoke and lay for a moment, bewildered. Sun was streaming in at the little window, and that was something unusual. There was one boot on the floor, but the other, he discovered, was still on his foot. He swung his legs out, reached mechanically for the other boot and pulled it on. After all, this was one morning when he didn't need to hurry. Or to worry. Things had been decided.

It was the middle of the forenoon, as a glance at the sun told him. Hank Measen came hurrying from his telegraph car to report that all was going well. The lake had lowered enough so that there was no longer much danger of a break at the dam, and was siphoning steadily. The crew was at work, and at the present rate, stood to finish well within the time limit.

"And with LeGrande out of the way, and everything—well, I don't reckon there'll be much more trouble," sighed Hank, almost wistfully. "Oh, yes. Here's a telegram come for yuh, last night."

He handed it over and returned to his own car. Jeff read it, stuffed it absently into his pocket, and went after some breakfast. With that done, he turned to the post office—which was also the caboose.

Nora opened the door for him, smiling. A new, radiant-eyed Nora—or rather, he reflected a little wistfully, the old Nora again.

"You look better, Jeff," she said surveying him critically. "For once, you've had a decent sleep. And you certainly had it coming. Everybody was almost going on tiptoe this morning, getting out of town, so that you could sleep."

"I don't think that was necessary to keep me snoozing," Jeff managed a grin. "How's Dave coming?"

"He just woke up too, a little while ago. You can see him."

Dave Macy was in Dinny McQuade's own bunk, and though he still looked pale and wan, he presented a vastly better appearance than on the night before.

"Hello, Jeff," he greeted. "I'm still alive and kicking—though last night I didn't expect to see another sunrise."

"You took a bad wound, but it looks like you'd lick it," Jeff nodded. "And with a nurse like Nora, how could you help getting well?"

"There's a lot to that," Macy nodded. Nora had slipped out of the car, leaving them alone. He stared up at Jeff for a long moment, his face twisted suddenly.

"I wish it had finished me," he said with sudden bitterness. "I'm pretty much of a cur—and it would have been the simple way out. I haven't any excuses—"

"You don't need any," Jeff returned. "I've learned a few things in the last few days, Dave. How you gambled with LeGrande, back a few months ago, and got in so deep that he was boss. And a pretty tough boss, I guess."

"I was a damned fool," Macy growled. "Debt of honor! And I sacri-

ficed any honor I ever had for that."

"You were all of what you call yourself, to play with a man like him. He used a stacked deck on you, Dave."

Macy's eyes widened a little, then he sighed.

"I didn't know that. Though I suppose I might have guessed it. But that's no excuse."

"No, it's no excuse. But what you did last night—that goes a long way toward atoning for the rest, Dave. You saved the Spur, and the Spur saves the Northern. Garth Hamby is a square-shooter. He won't forget."

"He is square—though I tried to do him dirt—getting in with that other crowd who called themselves big business men. A gang of big thieves. Maybe he won't prosecute—but I'm all washed up there."

"No." Jeff was staring out the window now, unseeingly. "I just had a telegram from Hamby, Dave. Seems your sister came for a visit to their house—and she doesn't know what a skunk you've been. She still thinks you're a square-shooter. And Garth says she is. That she's all wrapped up in you. So, for her sake—well, Garth wires me that he's kept his mouth shut, hoping for the best. And that best turned up last night. So you're still on the books as superintendent of the Northern."

Macy was staring incredulously, a slow-dawning hope on his face. Jeff turned back to drop a hand lightly on his shoulder for a moment, then swung to the door.

"So, if you're ready to work for the Northern now, Dave—you can go back to your old job as soon as you're able."

CHAPTER XXIX

The Name Fits

IT WAS dark when Jeff returned to town. A soft, warm dark for the time of year, like a transplanted evening from summer. The stars were splashes of yellow gold across a deep purple sky. And Hellgate itself was a scene of high revelry, of celebration, since this was Saturday evening, and following the events of the past few days, there was something to really celebrate.

Jeff had spent the day up-canyon, having a look at the tunnel, going over to the dam, where the lake was now draining away at a rate to guard against any further danger, back again to look after a dozen odd jobs. He had worked hard, with a curious reluctance to return to town. But it had to be done, like a lot of other unpleasant things. . . .

He entered the cook shack itself, since supper was long over, ate on a corner of the cook's work table, and wandered outside again. For the first time since taking over the job as trouble-shooter, he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

"Iit's a beautiful evening, Jeff."

Jeff started, glanced around, and perceived that, as he lounged in the shadow of the cook shanty, one foot cocked back against the side of the building, so did Nora lounge, with one foot cocked back against the side. She had slipped up there, quietly as a shadow, while he peered unseeingly toward the bright lights and bustle a couple of blocks away.

"A right nice evening, Nora," he agreed.

Her eyes were soft, but her tongue was unexpectedly sharp.

"And I suppose you're so full of nobleness that you're just bursting with it?"

Jeff swung around, startled, and dropped the hat which he had been twisting between his fingers. He stooped to pick it up, thought better of it, and let it lie.

"Nobility?" he echoed. "Me?"

She flashed him a quick smile, her voice was soft again.

"Oh, you are noble, Jeff. No one could be more so."

"Noble!" Jeff snorted. "Nothing of the sort. I'm that full up of concentrated cussedness that it spills out all over the place. That's why they picked me for trouble-shooter."

Nora serenely ignored this outburst.

"I know why you're doing it, of course, Jeff. Not for Dave Macy's

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Fifty Dollars on Faith

By
J. A. Bickard

WHEN Tom Kellis entered the town of Midland, Texas, one windy afternoon about forty years ago, he carried all his worldly possessions in a one horse buckboard. They consisted of enough paper and printing type to set up a paper, plus thirty dollars in cash.

Things did not look too promising for his trade. He found a vacant building, and managed to pay two weeks board in advance, but he also found a rival newspaper already established. This newspaper was a strong supporter of the settlers, so Kellis promptly announced himself for the cattlemen.

That rivalry between these two factions of citizens was extremely bitter, a man with one eye and half sense could see. And soon after Kellis arrived, things came to a head.

A meeting was called at the court house for the purpose of raising money to widen the lanes running into the town. As it boasted a railroad and was a shipping point, the cattlemen were having considerable trouble driving their stock through the narrow lanes that were being built. It was proposed to secure enough money to pay for the land and to invoke the state's power of taking land for public use, if necessary.

Both editors were invited, and both were called upon to make a speech and to contribute to the cause. Kellis' rival rose and said in part, "I won't give a cent. What we need is not more cattle but more settlers. With the thousands of acres of virgin soil in this county peopled by settlers, it would soon become one of the most prosperous places in the state, and the population of Midland would be doubled in a short while."

THERE were a few cheers and many boos as he sat down. The chairman rapped on the table and called on Kellis. That newcomer had been doing some tall thinking as he sat there. Of money he had only six dollars left. He knew he would be expected to start the movement with a generous donation, and that unless he could secure some quick subscribers or advertisers he was sunk. He took the gamble.

"Gentlemen," he began, "this is a great country for cattle, but it's no place for a farmer; he will starve to death. The Lord made it too dry for farming, and no puny man can change it. At times it crowds the owls and prairie dogs to live. The farmers come in and plow up the sod and ruin a lot of good grass, and after they have left, the country will be the worse for their coming. I'll give fifty dollars to start with, and if I get enough subscriptions and advertising I'll give more later."

The meeting was a huge success for its sponsors. The money was raised; the lanes were widened, and Kellis and his newspaper prospered. He remained to fight the battles of the ranchmen, with their loyal support and patronage. His rival suspended publication and left. His giving of fifty dollars when he did not have it had paid a huge reward.

(THE END)

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By Lee Floren

Plus

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And Ben Gipson decided that even the proper etiquette for hanging wasn't to his liking — particularly when he was danged sure he hadn't killed old Dave Campbell.

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"Paint" McCabe showed lawman Littlejohn that the best old lawdog can always find use for a new trick!

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And their women understand when it's a case of either kill or be killed!

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A fact article about the men who rodded the law in the old West.

KILLER'S BONANZA.....By John A. Latham
Old "Mosshead" Slater could take the townsfolk laughing at him—it was the danger that a helpless man would swing because of that laughter that stuck in his craw!

HANDCUFFS FOR THE WOLF BRED By Cliff Walters
The elder Tarquinn had been an outlaw, and died under the gun of the law; young Dave rode straight — but a hangnoose seemed to be his trail's end!

HELL-ROARING HOLIDAY.....By Cliff Campbell
A true story of a big event in the early life of Comanche.

MAN HUNTER (Novelet).....By C. C. Staples
Big Zeb had hung up his guns long ago, but when he ran into those stagecoach bandits, nothing could stop him from going after them!

Don't Miss the Spring Issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

BORN TO THE WILD

By D. C. Kerr

IT IS A curious fact—in the most lawless days of the Old West—that thieving parties, whether red or white, would sometimes ride for days among bands of wild horses, to try to steal the domesticated animals of the frontier ranchers and farmers.

But the reason for this was not hard to find. It was inherent in the wild hearts of the wild horses themselves.

The word "mustang"—generally applied to the wild, or semi-wild, horses of the Old West—stems from the Spanish word *mesteno*, meaning "wild." And "wild" the mustangs were, roaming the unfenced western world in thousands.

The unit of the mustangs was the *manada*, containing sometimes as many as forty mares and colts, led by a stallion who had proved his right to leadership. Younger stallions herded by themselves until they could steal, or build up, *manadas* of their own.

Some men made a business of catching mustangs, and the method usually used was to select a *manada*, and "walk it down." The walking, of course, was done on horseback.

In this the hunters usually worked in pairs, or in groups. Relaying each other, they would follow the *manada* for days. As the fleeing mustangs tired—and grew lank from lack of feed and water—they permitted the hunters to ride closer, and ever closer, until eventually they were captured.

Another method was to take out a herd of domestic horses, and contrive to mix a band of mustangs with them. Then the whole bunch was driven into a corral.

ONCE the mustangs were corraled, they had to be "herd-broken." An accepted way of doing this was to tie a length of rope to one of the mustang's front feet. If he tried to run, he tripped up by stepping on the rope with his hind feet. When herd-broken, the mustangs were driven to market. Sold into more settled country they became valuable animals.

Generally speaking, though, the mustangs on the open range were a nuisance to the rancher and farmer. They broke fences, trampled crops, and lured away gentle stock. Inevitably, war was declared upon them.

Mustang colts were sometimes caught, and raised as domestic animals. But the trouble with trying to domesticate the grown mustangs was that—born to the wild—they were sure, if opportunity offered, to return to their wild ways.

Sometimes mustang drives were put on, to move them away from the settlers' crops and fences. In many places the mustangs retreated to the mountains, the brush country, and the desert. But in some places the remnants of the mustang herds were finished off with saddle-guns. By the eighteen-eighties they had become scarce.

Like the Texas Longhorn of the old Chisholm Trail, the mustang—that spirit of the unfenced west—is now little more than a memory. But to the old-time mustang-hunter, no more beautiful sight was ever seen than a mustang stallion, with arched neck, and flowing name and tail, as the head of his *manada*.

(THE END)

BAD MEDICINE FOR THE APACHE KID

A True Account of a Famous Raid.

By KENNETH P. WOOD

A CLOUD OF dun-colored dust appeared on the horizon as Jim Clark stood by the open gates of his walled enclosure in the full glare of the Arizona sun with a Winchester in the crook of his left arm. Shading his eyes with his right hand he watched the dust cloud resolve itself into a lone freighter drawn by four lathered and panting horses that were straining under the searing lash of the driver's whip. The racing team was headed for his isolated little outpost and that meant trouble.

Hank, Clark's son, and Frank Coyle, a visiting cowpuncher, ran to the gates just as the careening vehicle thundered in, followed by a choking wave of dust. Two sweat-smeared and alkali-whitened figures sat tensely on the driver's seat, while a third stood in the wagon gesticulating wildly and waving a shotgun over head. Once inside the walls the team came to a rattling stop, and without a word of greeting the shotgun-man pointed in the direction from whence they had come, shouting breathlessly the dreaded word, "Apaches!"

Jim Clark and his eighteen-year-old boy were two unsung and little-known pioneers who helped win the Arizona desert country. They staked out a claim and operated a small mine on the edge of that fiery desolation where the withering sun has burned the last vestige of passion from the earth and left it as stark as the moon. Their home was an abandoned pony express station some twenty miles from Bonita, which for many years served as a haven for freighters, travelers, and itinerant prospectors. The house was of solid adobe, a large single-room affair with one door and two windows, surrounded by an eight-foot wall of the same strong sun-baked clay. It was jokingly referred to as "Clark's Fort," and up to a comparatively recent date was a landmark in Brick Dust Canyon.

When the warning was given by the three freighters, Dick Nolan, Marty Ward, and Lou Nydick, the huge wooden gates were quickly slammed, bolted, and braced with heavy timbers for old man Clark knew exactly what to expect. Long years on the Arizona frontier where the quenchless Geronimo and the Apache Kid were continually on the loose, murdering and raiding, had taught him how to deal with the marauders.

"I allus declared that the on'y good Injun is a dead one," Clark muttered between set teeth, as the five men crowded around him for orders. "An' if them devils is on the prod agin, we're in a tough spot."

Then without ceremony he began to organize his little force. First, he took a hasty inventory of the available firearms and ammunition in his miniature storeroom, calling on the little body of men to exhibit such weapons as they had about them.

Next he brought out a number of guns. He had two excellent repeating rifles, with several hundred rounds of cartridges, and one old large bore buffalo piece. Last came a motley array of sixshooters, some of which were serviceable, and for which there was a limited amount of ammunition. Two hand axes and two long bowie knives were counted as weapons for close quarters.

Meanwhile Hank had been sent to the top of the house, which had a low flat roof, where he was keeping his eyes strained for any sign of the redskins, while the freighters unhitched

their horses and led them around to the rear of the building. Within a few minutes young Clark called to his father that he saw another cloud in the distance, and before he could determine what it was the raiding Indians were in sight endeavoring to overtake the freighters before they reached the walled enclosure. It was a small band, however, under the leadership of the Apache Kid, the renegade understudy of Geronimo, that galloped up and came to a skidding halt several hundred yards from the "fort."

AT THE same moment a shot rang out and pinged off the adobe. This was followed by a volley fire from the hostiles. Clark leaped behind the wagon which had been placed against the wall, and prepared for action. And it came—faster than he anticipated. For there was a sudden charge by a score of Indian ponies, the blood-curdling yells of the riders, and the crack of rifles. Their first volley did no damage, but it was sufficiently accurate to cause Hank to dodge behind the stone chimney, then slip down to the ground.

The attackers made a sudden and savage onslaught upon the immense gates, but they held firmly, being well braced by stout timbers. So far not a sound escaped from the little group of defenders, and it was evident that the Apaches were nonplused that they had not made a greater impression, or had not drawn a return fire from those within.

For the next few minutes the attackers could be heard in noisy consultation at the gates. Presently a voice called to "open up" in broken English. To this no reply was made, nor was any evidence vouchsafed from the yard that the summons had been heard.

"Now, boys," whispered the elder Clark, "be prepared. If they get no answer from us they'll show their heads over the wall in a minute—just over there, near the wagon, I reckon. That's the easiest place for 'em to look over, an' I've tried to make it look invitin' with the wagon on this side. So keep yore sixguns limbered an' yore eyes peeled. Pick out yore man, an' don't miss, or we'll all go to glory with our boots on."

After an interval of painful silence, four Apache heads bobbed up above the adobe wall simultaneously. They were evidently so sure the place was poorly protected that all four of them, in their anxiety and enthusiasm, climbed halfway over before they became aware of the reception that had been planned. The fusillade which greeted their appearance was almost like one shot, each of the four Indians receiving the bullet intended for him. Two were instantly killed, and partly hung inside the enclosure as, they doubled up and collapsed while one slipped all the way into the yard, stone dead. The fourth, mortally wounded, was dragged away on the opposite side by two of his more fortunate tribesmen who had stayed out of the men's aim.

With that first volley fire from within, all hell seemed to break loose on the other side of the wall. The attackers let out a yell of rage that fairly chilled the defenders to the bone. Clark motioned to the men to retreat into the house, and they were none too soon, for the Apaches retaliated by pouring a screaming fire of lead into the enclosure, taking pot shots at the little garrison from over the wall and through the chinks in the gates, without putting their heads in jeopardy again.

From the doorway of the adobe, Clark, who seemed to be everywhere at the same time using his Winchester with unerring accuracy, discovered that the besiegers were trying to burrow under the gates, and were making some little headway. But the moment a hand appeared in the growing excavation he let drive with his repeater, and another Indian howled with pain as he withdrew.

Lou Nydick the driver of the team, kept a mental tally of the fallen. Hank told him after he had come down from the roof that he had counted twenty-three riders in the war party, so Nydick calculated: "Four down in the first attack on the wall, one shot through the hand,

under the gate. Balance to their credit—eighteen."

JUST AT this juncture the men inside received an unexpected shock. A curl of gray smoke started to rise above the gates. The Apaches were piling brush against the wooden barricade which had already been set on fire. This was a serious predicament that even the cautious Clark had not counted upon.

"You fellas stay in the house," he said in low tones, "an' I'll see what I can do about this here conflagration those dirty sons have started."

Nydick, in his eagerness to drop a couple of the raiders and thus raise the casualty list, started to follow Clark, who, with gun in hand, was creeping on all fours toward the wagon by the wall. On reaching the vehicle Clark climbed inside, slowly bringing his eyes to the level of the wall and at the same time shouldering his repeater. Then he let go several fast shots into the milling attackers at the gates, and quickly dropped back into the wagon to await their reaction. There was another infuriated yell from the outside, so he leaped to the ground and sped back to cover.

One of the attackers took a snap shot at him through a crack in the gate. The slug missed, fortunately, but came near to being fatal to his son, for the youth had been so intent upon watching his father that he stood in the open doorway and on a direct line with the ball which imbedded itself in the jam. Instead of bolting for shelter at the sound of the shot, Nydick who had followed the senior Clark was now standing in the offing, with but one thought in mind—to check up the account. Therefore, in the next instant—foolhardy as it seemed—he leaped on the wagon, peered over the wall, and took a hasty count of the casualties outside.

Although Jim Clark's Winchester had belched a long line of lead in the direction of the gates, there were only five Indians down, two of which appeared actually dead.

But before Nydick could withdraw his head and drop back in the wagon, something struck him squarely in the face, a hand seized him from the opposite side of the wall, and he was hauled halfway over, right into the arms of the murderous Apache Kid himself. His loud oath of protest brought two figures sprinting from the adobe to his assistance, while he struck out blindly with clenched fists, flailing and slugging, at the same time trying to cling with all his might to the wall with his legs.

Things were going rather badly for Nydick, since his hold on the hardened clay was weakening and the adobe crumbling under his weight. Just as he was about to give up hope, there was a concerted tug from behind—Clark and his son were on the wagon endeavoring to help him.

The fighting freighter was seized by the legs and nearly pulled apart. With helping hands on his side he managed to strike out with renewed vigor, and landed such a terrific tattoo on the face of the Kid that the Apache chief involuntarily sought to protect his eyes with his hand and thus let go his hold, whereupon the two Clarks and Nydick landed in a tangled heap in the yard. A few opportune shots from the puncher Frank Coyle who had been waiting his chance near the adobe caused the Indian to quickly withdraw from sight.

It was a few minutes before the rescued man, battered and scratched, with his clothes torn, returned to his senses after being dragged back to the safety of the adobe. His first words were: "Two more killed, three badly wounded—net balance thirteen. That number is unlucky—we'll win!"

"What in tarnation yuh ravin' about, anyhow," asked the elder Clark, who was bending over Nydick with a flask.

"Well, there was twenty-three of 'em when we started. We bumped off four at the first encounter, one at the second, and two at the third, beside crippling three beyond present help. That leaves thirteen, don't it?"

(Continued On Page 90)

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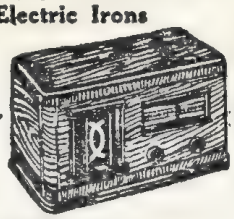

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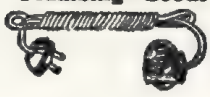

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 88)

The colloquy between the two was suddenly interrupted by the sound of splintering wood—the gates were being forced. Dick Nolan, Marty Ward, and Frank Coyle wheeled, their sixshooters weaving, while Jim Clark leveled his Winchester at the barricade from the doorway of the adobe, while young Hank assisted Lou Nydick to his feet.

Through the bulging cracks in the gates they could see the Indians working feverishing and persistently with a battering-ram improvised from a tree trunk taken from Clark's woodpile outside the "fort." At any moment the barricade would fall, and the defenders realized there would be no hope of quarter if the ruthless Apaches gained the enclosure.

"Look here, fellas," Clark said gravely, "we gotta make some sort o' last stand. Them gates'll be down in a minute, the fire has weakened 'em. Fill yore pockets with shells an' slip 'round to the back where Hank'll held yuh to the roof. Now, git, pronto!"

CLIMBING ON the shoulders of young Clark the men gained the housetop where the scorching heat waves shimmered in the midday sun. After hauling up Hank by the hand, all six prepared to face the final assault. They stretched themselves out flat, sweating and cursing softly, with their guns leveled and waiting. The gates creaked and groaned under pressure as they bellied inward, while those on the roof watched with baited breath for the concerted rush to follow.

Within sixty seconds there came a resounding crash. The barricaded portal went down. In tumbled the marauders, their bodies glistening in full warpaint, just thirteen in number as Nydick had figured. But the sudden collapse of the gates had taken them off their feet and off their balance, too, and before they could right themselves, there was an order given on the roof.

"Now," Jim Clark's voice snapped, "let 'em have it!"

Rifles banged, sixguns barked, and shots hummed and whistled a song of death as they glanced and rico-

cheted off the stone chimney and the adobe. Old man Clark's Winchester belched a veritable chain of lead, and the others pumped bullets as fast as their trigger-fingers could flex, while a heavy cloud of acrid-smelling powdersmoke enveloped the yard. To add to the riot of noise, shots, and yells, the terrified horses at the rear of the enclosure whinnied and screamed as they raced in a panic back and forth seeking some avenue of escape.

When at last the echoes died away among the hills and the smoke curtain lifted, the men on the roof gazed down upon a scene of slaughter. The Apaches had been taken completely by surprise, having rushed in helter-skelter expecting to meet the defenders face to face, and not expecting hot lead to be sprayed down upon them from the roof.

Eight were dead, grotesquely sprawled in a pool of blood between the fallen gates and the house. Three others were crawling away on hands and knees, bleeding profusely, until Clark put them out of their misery with a Winchester ball apiece in the head. This left only two according to Nydick's calculations, unaccounted for, and they were soon discovered, making off over the sandy wastes of Brick Dust Canyon on their mounts, frantically driving a score of riderless ponies ahead of them, several of which carried the limp bodies of the other wounded braves. One of the riders was the Apache Kid, the leader, who luckily escaped with a whole skin, but with his visage badly beaten into a bloody pulp by Lou Nydick's big, driving fists.

Jim Clarke actually saved the day, his resourcefulness and fighting courage having turned the tide against fearful odds, since there were no actual fatalities among the men who stood back to back with him in fighting off the raiders. And for a number of years afterward he continued to live in his little adobe "fort," forgetful of the terrible scene of struggle and carnage he had passed through, but ever on the alert for a return visit from the Kid, until the renegade Apaches were silenced forever by the United States Cavalry.

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ported the gunfight, an' the deputy went out after the body."

Jeff Shaw got to his feet. His slender face, almost pale now, showed his conflicting emotions. He had a feeling of loss, and his grief was heavy inside.

LeRoy had been his only brother, and they had made plans regarding each other's future. They owned the Circle S together; they had built it, and LeRoy was dead, and the future was a bucket of ashes.

"You don't know which one of them killed him?" he asked.

Rheumy Smithers shook his head. "They never come into town after the killin'. The deputy was over on Wheeler Springs, an' they rode to him there."

Jeff walked to the window. Unknowingly, he still carried a metal file; now unconsciously he toyed with it. From here he could see the street and the three men who had just ridden up to the deputy's office and dismounted. A small group of inquisitive townspeople had gathered around the three. The deputy was untying LeRoy's body from across the saddle.

Rheumy Smithers asked, "What're goin' to do, Jeff?"

Jeff studied him. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Jeff. Matt Burdick, an' that gunman of his, Jeremiah, have been out for LeRoy for some time, even when you was in the army. Now they've killed him an' they haven't given him a fair chance."

"How do you know they haven't?"

"Did they," asked Rheumy Smithers, "ever give anybody a square deal?"

Jeff shook his head.

The old man was silent, growling through his beard, then he turned and hobbled out, his worn boots loud on the plank sidewalk outside. Jeff stood there, still holding the file, and his face was bitter. Now, as he stood there, he looked like he was forty and he was only twenty-four—but he only looked that age when he smiled. War and guns had lain their fingers across him and he had seen death, and he had killed men.

(Continued On Page 96)

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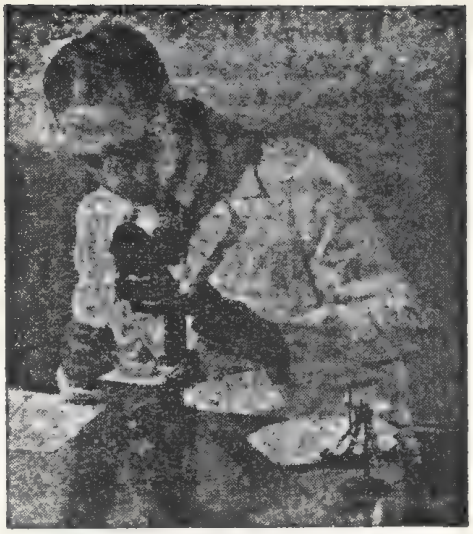

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(Continued From Page 94)

He laid down the file and went into the street.

THEY HAD LeRoy on the floor of the deputy's office when Jeff came in. He stood and looked down and saw that LeRoy had been shot three times: twice in the chest and once in the belly. He had seen a few other men lay like that, shot through the chest and belly, back there on San Juan's Hill and those other scattered fields of battle. This scene was not new to him. He looked at the deputy.

"Who shot him?" he asked.

The deputy looked at Matt Burdick. "Who did?"

Matt Burdick said, "I did."

This man Burdick was not very tall, but he was heavy. His nose was flat, his eyes dark, and there was power in him. Jeff Shaw felt this power; he looked at the man known as Jeremiah.

"Did you shoot, too?"

Jeremiah studied him. He was a thin, string-bean-type man who had ridden with Burdick for three years; nobody knew his last name. Maybe, as far as that was concerned, nobody knew his first name—a man can travel far and pick up a new name, and maybe he has picked up so many, he forgets his real name. Now Jeremiah looked at him, and his eyes were expressionless.

"No," he said, "I didn't shoot."

Matt Burdick cut in. "What are you drivin' at, Jeff?"

Jeff said, quietly, "LeRoy was a good hand with a gun." His gaze held Burdick's. "Yet it looks like he never got in a shot at you an' you shot him three times."

Burdick asked, "Are you accusin' me of murder?"

The deputy frowned. "That's right," he said. Then, to Burdick, "Hang on to your shirt, fellow." He had LeRoy's gun in his saddlebag. He got it and broke it open, and the shells fell out; one of them had been fired. Burdick saw that fired bullet, and Jeff saw something in the man's eyes.

Burdick said, to Jeremiah, "Did Shaw get in a shot? I was too busy fannin' my gun to notice."

"He got in one shot," said Jeremiah. "The bullet went wild. Your first two bullets hit him before he got to put in his bullet."

Burdick said, to the deputy, "That's it, then."

"There'll be a coroner's inquest," said the deputy. "The law demands that, Burdick. I'm not sayin' anythin' until six good men an' true bring in a legal verdict regardin' LeRoy's death."

Burdick looked at Jeff. "An' you?" he asked.

Jeff felt the keen rise of anger. The edge of this was sharp; it was bitter in its cutting point. But he held it and asked, "Are you lookin' for trouble, Matt Burdick?"

Burdick said, "Me an' Jeremiah were ridin' along on Wheeler road. Your brother comes up an' picks trouble with us. He goes for his gun an' I fire in self defense. Jeremiah here is my witness. I've had quite a bit of trouble with you Shaw boys. I don't like you gents an' you don't like me. LeRoy said once this range was too small for me an' him. I'll deal with you, Jeff."

"Your terms?"

"I'll buy your outfit just to get the Taylor Springs, or I'll buy just the land surroundin' the springs, whichever you want."

Jeff said, "You're talkin' for the benefit of these people here, Burdick. You never bought anything in your life when you could take it by force."

He had said too much, and he knew it, and now the trouble was here.

BURDICK grabbed him by the front of his shirt, and Jeff heard the sibilant hiss of tearing cloth. Burdick's right fist came in—and it came in hard. Jeff saw it, moved his head to one side, and the fist went by. Burdick lunged ahead, pushed by his swinging blow, and he stepped into Jeff's quick uppercut.

Jeff could break a man's neck with that uppercut, and he had done just that in hand-to-hand fighting, there in Cuba. But he held the blow somewhat, then his knuckles smashed against Burdick's jaw.

Burdick was tough; he grunted, he bored in. He hit Jeff under the left

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ribs, and pain cut Jeff. He hit Burdick again on the jaw; this time he did not hold it, and Burdick went down.

Jeff leaned against the wall, his breathing heavy, and looked at Jeremiah. For some time he held the gunman's gaze, and Jeremiah must have read the naked hell in Jeff's eyes, for he held his tongue and his guns. The anger passed, then, and Jeff felt the sting of it, and he was himself again.

Burdick got to his feet. He wiped his mouth with his hand, and Jeff saw the streak of blood against the skin. Burdick said, very slowly, "Are you or aren't you sellin', Jeff?"

"I'm not."

Burdick looked at Jeremiah. Their eyes met, and each knew the other's thoughts; then Burdick turned to Jeff.

"No man a-livin', he said, "can knock me down an' not pay for it, Jeff. You've got guns an' I've seen you use them. Next time you meet me on the street, you better have your guns on you."

Jeff said nothing.

BURDICK and Jeremiah left, and the deputy made the people go outside. Then he and Jeff lifted LeRoy to the table, and laid him there. The deputy put LeRoy's hands together on the dead man's chest. He was a silent man, as a rule, and he was silent now, but he was busy with thoughts. And finally he broke his silence.

"Burdick will be out to kill you, Jeff."

Jeff nodded.

The deputy looked at him. "What do you say, Jeff?"

"I guess so," said Jeff.

The deputy frowned. He was puzzled, and his eyes showed it. He stood there for a long moment, looking down at the dead man, and then he said, "I guess I'm hungry, Jeff. I better lock the office."

Jeff went out ahead of him.

The deputy left him standing there, and finally Jeff went to his shop. He went behind his bench and sat down and started filing on the hammer for the .30-30, but his fin-

gers were stiff. He looked at his hand and noticed the knuckles were skinned and wondered why he had not noticed this before.

He got to his feet and walked to the window. The street was before him with its worn walks, its weather-dulled tieracks; there were the buildings and the houses. He stood there for some time and looked at it but he didn't see it. He remembered that look back there in the deputy's eyes.

He heard the back door open and he turned. A young woman entered. She was slender and her face showed character. He looked at her and thought of his future, and of her place in it.

"I just heard, Jeff," she said.

He said, "Yes, he's dead, Martha." He wanted to say more but he couldn't.

"Jeremiah says LeRoy went for his gun, first."

"Jeremiah's a liar."

She said, "On what do you base that?"

"Burdick plays his cards close. He never makes a move until he has the top hand. He isn't fool enough to ride out and fight LeRoy. No, he aims to keep on living. He claims LeRoy got in one shot. I know he didn't. 'Cause if he had, he'd killed Burdick. LeRoy could handle a gun."

"But they found an empty shell in LeRoy's gun?"

"Yeah, but Burdick and Jeremiah never knew it was there until just a little while ago in the deputy's office. They never knew that LeRoy always carried an empty cartridge under his firing pin."

She frowned. "What good does knowing that do, Jeff?"

"None." His voice rose a little. "He's dead, an' when a man's dead, he's dead. That's all. He's dead an', he can't move. He'll never taste bitterness and sweet, he'll never feel the wind against his cheeks, he'll never hear the patter of rain."

She said, almost sternly, "Jeff!"

"Forgive me," he said.

SHE CAME closer. The essence of her filled his nostrils—she was healthy and clean, and she was desirable. But he shut his mind

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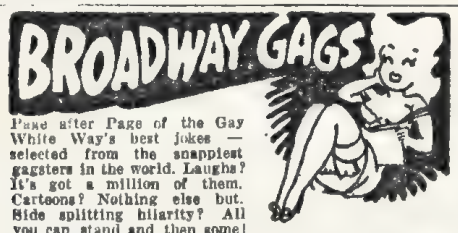

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against this, as he had shut it many times before.

"What are you going to do, Jeff?"

"What can I do, Martha?"

"You can run from them," she said. "Or you can fight them."

"Fight," he said, cynically; "I've been doing that for two years. What is there to fight over? A piece of land, a few springs bubbling up from the earth. I've seen them die for land, and I've seen them die for water."

"Then that's your viewpoint?"

"That's it."

"I'm only a woman," she said. "I don't know everything; in fact, I don't know much. But that only leaves one thing for you to do, and that is to run. To leave this town and leave me and leave your shop and these memories. Are you going to do that, Jeff?"

He made no answer.

She was silent for a long moment. Time pulled out and lengthened and he saw that she was close to tears. She turned and went to the door and he thought she was going to leave, but she stopped and faced him.

"Some men have to die, Jeff."

"What do you mean?"

"They have to die, so that others may live. Jeff, don't you see that Burdick and Jeremiah have to go: What if they don't? They'll spread out and get more greedy and then they'll kill somebody else. And you'll be the cause of that person's death."

"In what way?"

"Of the men in this town, you're about the only man quick enough with a gun to shoot down either of them." Her voice had settled now. "You got to remember you're not living for yourself alone, Jeff. No man can live alone. He lives for the woman he loves, the neighbors he respects, the men who know him and joke with him."

"You sound like a preacher," he said.

YOU GO through a battle and it takes something out of you, and you can never replace what you lose. Maybe you lose some of your courage and maybe you don't; maybe you lose some of your perspective, and maybe

you get hard and calloused inside. For you've seen men die—you've seen your friends die, and you've seen your enemies die.

You go into gunfire, and you're hard. And something in that gunfire toughens you still harder and makes you steel. But when you come out you're tired, and you remember hearing somebody once say that even steel finally grows tired, and it needs a rest—and you need a rest. But when you've got that rest over with, you're still tired and you never want to lift a gun again.

Jeff drummed the file against his bench. His face had that forty-year-old look; he was old before his time, and his face showed his thoughts. Even now, he knew that they were talking in this town—he was a coward; his brother had been murdered; he was throwing down Martha; he was ready to run. And once, before the war, he had walked and fought on these streets, and blood had been strong in him.

But they didn't know about the jungles and the steam; they didn't know how you feel when you go ahead in the brush, and how you wonder where that sniper's bullet will hit you. No, they didn't know that you had seen enough of guns, and enough of death; that you were tired—even if you were just twenty-four—and you never wanted to kill again, not even a coyote or a jackrabbit or a cottontail.

They had their views and you had yours and yours conflicted with theirs. Jeff moved to the window and looked out at the setting sun. But there was no solace in the sun—it had gone down that way over San Juan, and the streamers of light had slipped across the sky in the same manner. He walked back to his bench. He sat down and took the file and gunhammer, but it was no use. His mind was not in his work; the bitterness hung across his thoughts.

* * *

Jeremiah came in. He closed the door behind him and he stood silent for a small length of time. Jeff

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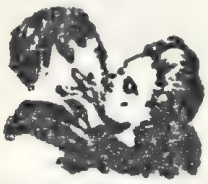

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looked at him and tried to read the gunman's eyes, but there was no life, no movement, behind them.

Jeremiah said, "Matt Burdick sent me over."

"Why?"

Those eyes were deadpan. "Burdick wants to know what's on your mind, Shaw. Are you or aren't you sellin' the springs?"

Jeff shook his head.

"Then," said Jeremiah, "you'd better leave the country."

Jeff felt that tenseness across his spine. Jeremiah had come in from the alley door, and maybe nobody had seen him. Jeff had a .45, but it was in the drawer of his desk. He glanced at the rifles hanging on the wall, but they were all in for repairs, and there wasn't a bullet in them. Jeremiah followed his glance and Jeremiah's lips moved slightly. Then his eyes showed a flicker of light. This swept across them, and then it died.

"You leavin', Shaw?"

"No."

Jeremiah moved back against the wall. He stood dark and thin, and now his hands were resting on his belts ahead of his guns. Jeff knew he had only one chance, and he moved forward too, and Jeremiah saw this.

He said, "Keep your distance, Shaw. . . ."

JEFF Shaw realized, suddenly, in that brief moment, that he was angry—but it was not a hot-headed anger, it was a cold deliberateness. He asked, quietly, "Did Matt Burdick send you down here to murder me?"

Jeremiah said, "You won't get out of here alive." He was going for his guns, then, but Jeff hit him first. Jeremiah went back hard against the wall, and Jeff closed in. He got one gun before Jeremiah could get it. He took this gun and threw it aside, but the man fired the other gun, and the bullet got Jeff through the right side of his belly.

The bullet blasted into him, almost doubling him. He thought, *All bullets feel the same—they jerk you around and then there isn't much pain.* He had hold of Jeremiah's gun, and they wrestled for it. He knew

how to take a gun away from a man, and he twisted keenly and sharply, and he heard Jeremiah's bones crackle. The gunman screamed, and Jeff had the .45.

He said, "Okay, fellow, we're even up."

Jeremiah came in, his fists working. There was a fine rim of pain around Jeff's belly, and he felt the warm blood under his belt. He put that aside and sent in two blows; one of them connected. Then Jeremiah had hit him twice, and Jeff was going backwards.

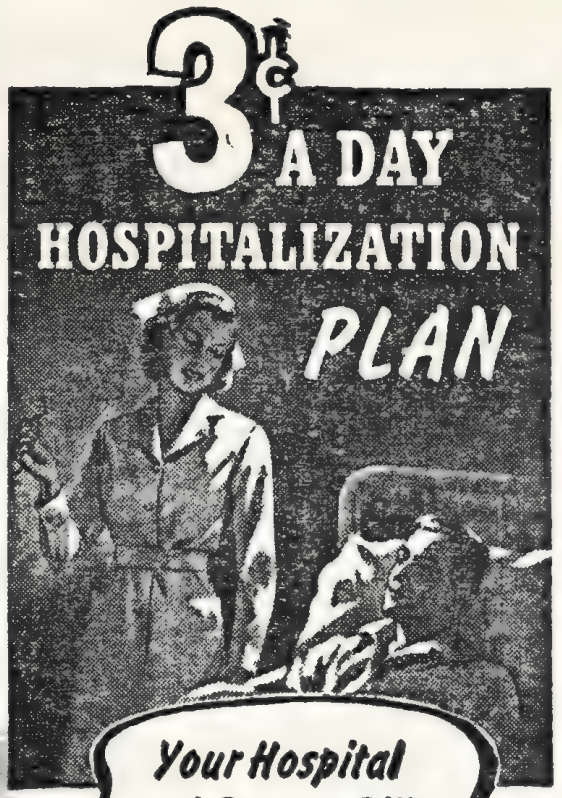
He had a display counter in his store, and his back caught across the rim of this. The thin railing held him for a second, then the counter broke with a cascade of falling glass, the thin smash of wood. Shards of glass slipped across the floor, and the articles on display were scattered.

Jeff fell to one knee, and Jeremiah stepped aside, but he was too slow. Jeff hit him with a hard tackle and they went to the floor. They rolled over and over, and Jeff saw the trail of blood on the floor. Jeremiah was kneeing him in the guts, driving the wind from him, and Jeff knew he couldn't stand much of that.

He brought his hand in fast. He did not double his fist, but he brought the hand in flatly, using the side as a hammer. He laid the blow across Jeremiah's throat, driving in the man's Adam's apple. The gunman tried to scream, but the sound ended as a gurgle, and Jeff hit him again in the same manner.

This time, though, he brought his hand in at a different angle, and he broke the gunman's neck. The second was sharp and keen, and Jeremiah gasped twice. Then he lay long and still on the floor, dead against the trail of Jeff's blood and the destruction. And Jeff got to his feet.

HE PUT his hand against his side and held back the blood. Now the anger had passed, and there was pain in him. He looked at the dead man, and he wondered idly how many he had killed, and that thought was acid. He felt the blood come from under his fingers, and it was warm and sticky.



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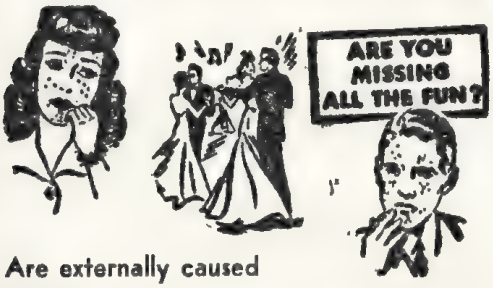

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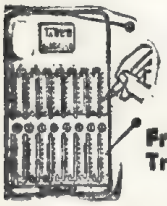

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He walked to the door and stepped outside. They had heard the commotion and one man said, "What's the matter, Jeff?" Jeff said, roughly, "Get out of my way, Leffinton," and the man fell back. Doc Tuggnon saw him coming and he came out of his office and put his arm around him.

"Take it easy, Jeff," he said.

Jeff murmured, "Thanks, doc." He had known this man for years, but Doc Tuggnon had known him even longer, for Doc Tuggnon had been at Jeff's birth. When they were in the office the doctor lay Jeff full-length on the platform. Jeff took his breath deep into him and fought the pain. A few people had followed them inside.

"Scatter," said the medico.

"Let Martha in when she comes," said Jeff.

The doctor closed the door and locked it. Jeff looked at the ceiling and thought: *Well, Matt Burdick will be after me, now. And it'll be for keeps, now, either me or him.*

But that thought, strangely, was not very alarming. Something else kept playing through his mind, coming in through the pain, and he gave this its due consideration. He would have to kill Burdick, or Burdick would kill him. And maybe, in that logic, lay some great fundamental truth. He winced suddenly.

"Go easy, doc."

"The bullet went right through, Jeff."

"That's good."

Maybe Martha was right. Maybe some men *had* to die, *had* to be extinguished, *had* to be eradicated, so that their fellow men could live peaceful lives. Maybe they were parasites upon the stream of mankind; they fed of the stream, but they did not replenish it. He tried to think of something he had once read, and it kept running around the edge of his thoughts, coloring them and giving them flavor, but he could not remember the words.

He had grown tired of guns and the death they personified. Lying there on that hard table, the feel of the lumber strong against his back, he saw that and evaluated it, and saw he had been wrong. But there had

been something inside of him, and he knew now it had been his nerves—they had been raw and bitter, and he had not known it until now.

He said, "It was never fear, doc."

Doc Tuggnon said, catching on, "No, it wasn't that, Jeff. You know, fellow, I've been watching you, and I've read it in you. You were tired and sort of mixed up. The war had thrown your life out of kilter, and you didn't know just where you stood."

"I know now," he said.

"You mean you're going to go against Burdick?"

Jeff smiled, and he was just twenty-four again. "Yes." He drew a deep breath. "That's the only way it can be settled."

"There's Martha," said the doctor.

He unlocked the door and let her in. She was breathing heavily, as though she had been running, and she said, "Are you hurt badly, Jeff?"

The doctor said, "The bullet tore through his flesh, but did not break into the stomach wall. He can walk, now, but he'll have to take it careful."

Jeff swung his legs around and sat on the table. He felt a rush of giddiness, and he said, "Jeremiah's dead, ain't he?"

"Yes," she said.

The doctor asked, "Did you kill him with your fist?"

"With the back of my palm," said Jeff. He added, "I've killed a couple of—" He stopped. He looked at Martha. "Where's Burdick?"

She said, "Why ask that?"

"I want to know."

Martha looked at Doc Tuggnon.

Doc Tuggnon said, "Tell him, Martha."

"He's in front of the Mercantile," she said. "He stopped me when I was going by. He told me to tell you he was shooting at you the minute you stepped on the street. We'll have to get him out the back door, doctor."

Jeff smiled. "My guns are in my office, Martha."

Martha looked at the medico. "Can he fight?"

Doc Tuggnon nodded.

Martha stood there for a long moment. And Jeff, sitting there on the table, felt sympathy for her. But the

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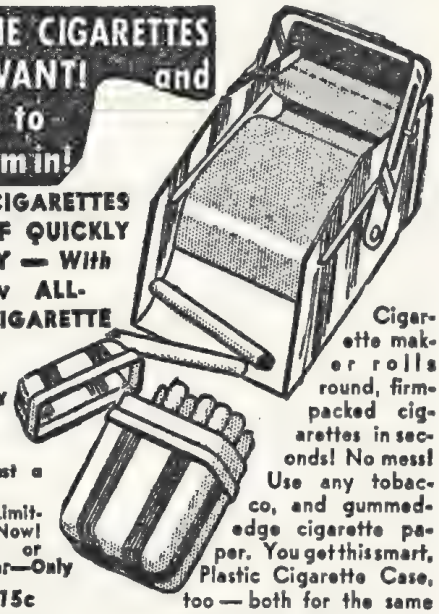

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decision was up to her, and he left it that way, knowing he could not solve her problem. He saw the trouble across her face, and then he saw those lines go.

"I'll get your guns for you, Jeff."

While she was gone, the medico bound Jeff's belly. He pulled the bandage tight, his fingers quick and steady, and Jeff felt the pain leave him somewhat. Still, all of it did not go. It lingered across him with a touch of sharpness. He drew in his breath, and that helped somewhat.

Martha came in and said, "Here they are, Jeff."

He had both guns in a single wide harness. He pulled this around him and buckled it, and settled it across his thighs. The tie-down thongs hung, tough buckskin whang-leather, and he pulled these tight around his legs. He loosened the guns and looked at their loads, and then settled them again in holsters.

Martha said, softly, "Good luck, Jeff."

He smiled then, and he was a boy. He said, "Thanks," and then he was forty again, and he was going out on the street. He stood there for a moment and fought the pain, and he knew, without looking, that the medico and Martha stood behind him, there in the doorway. He knew that but he did not look up, and he moved toward Hank Burdick.

MANY things fell against his mind, made their mark, and then moved back into space. This town was his birthplace and he had walked its streets—the boards had been harsh against his bare feet and then his boots had made their hollow sounds across it, just as they were doing now. The sun had set, now, and twilight hung across the ranges; the wind moved in against him, and he felt the coolness of it. It played across his cheek and jaws.

The pain had subsided across his belly, and what little there was did not bother him—he had no place for it now. Hank Burdick was coming across the street, and Burdick was big and powerful. He stood there and waited, and measured this power. He spread his legs wide and waited.

(Continued On Page 108)

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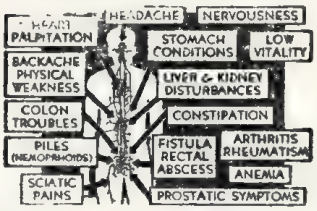

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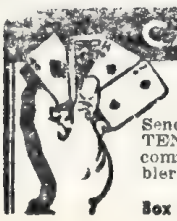

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(Continued From Page 106)

Burdick came on, and then he stopped. He was about fifteen feet away, and Jeff could see his face clearly. He was calm, this man Burdick, and Jeff saw then his true strength, his true power. He was strong, but he used his strength wrongly.

Burdick said, tightly, "This is it, Jeff."

Jeff said, "I guess so."

BURDICK moved slightly, and Jeff thought he was reaching. But Burdick had only shifted, and Jeff lost his tenseness slightly. Burdick saw this and knew that he had lured Jeff slightly off-guard, and then his elbows went back.

His guns came out of leather and they lifted cleanly. The wind came in then, stronger than before, and somewhere it sighed in the eaves. For one brief second, Jeff heard this sound, and he stored it in his memory. Then the wind blended into, and became lost, in the sound of guns.

Jeff felt his .45s kick back, and he knew they had both fired at about the same time. But he must have fired first, for Burdick's bullet smashed into the wall beside him, and he knew his lead had deflected Burdick's aim. The knowledge of this was bright in him, and in it lay his life. Three times each gun blasted and roared, and then he lowered them and stood there, feeling the rip and tug of emotions. And Matt Burdick's knees were bending.

Burdick tried to bring himself up. There was power in him and he used it; the struggle, brief though it were, showed the intensity of that brief battle, but the power lost. He dropped his guns, the barrels stabbing into the earth. He turned slightly and crashed over the weapons, falling on his side. The dust moved out from under him, but he did not move.

Jeff Shaw turned. The pain in his side was sharper. He went toward the doctor's office, walking slowly. When he got inside he saw that Martha held a rifle. He looked at the rifle for some time and then said, "You intended to use that on Burdick if I went down?"

She said, "Yes."

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 82)

sake, for he's a man, and in your code you'd let him stand on his own feet. But you're doing it for me—because you thought that I loved him."

"Because I thought that you loved him?" Jeff swung suddenly, new excitement creeping into his voice. Nora was staring perversely in the other direction, but her profile was very alluring, and was that the ghost of a smile which played around her mouth?

"Hang it all, you do love him, don't you?" Jeff burst out, and at the ragged pain and mingled hope in his voice she looked swiftly at him. "You were engaged to him—and I could see how hurt you were, after that day up in the hills—"

HE HAD her hands in his own big, work-hardened paws, looking down into her eyes. Nora met his gaze steadily now.

"Of course, I knew that you felt that way, Jeff, that that was why you did it all—sending another telegram to Garth Hamby telling him not to be in a hurry or to take any rash action in regard to Dave. And you did it all for me, even today. It was noble of you, Jeff."

"There's a lot of good in Dave—and I want to see you happy, Nora."

"Of course you do. And you're dreadfully blind, Jeff. And for a long time now you haven't called me Nora darlin'—not once."

"You—you mean—" There was a new light in Jeff's eyes now, but he still hesitated, incredulous. "You—I—"

"I hadn't met you, Jeff, when Dave first came along—nearly a year before I ever heard of you. And you'll have to admit that he's big, like you, and handsome—more than you will ever be, I'm afraid, Jeff. And he looked like a man, whether he was or not. And how was I to know the difference then—when I'd never seen you? He just swept me right off my feet, and I did think I was in love with him—until here a few weeks ago—"

"You mean," Jeff asked hoarsely,

(Continued On Page 112)

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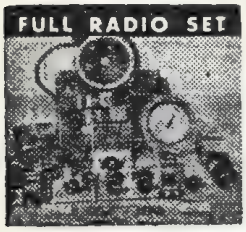

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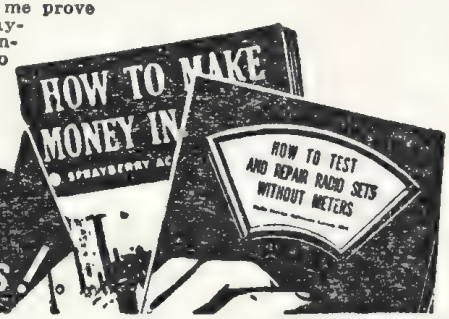

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Shootin' Iron

(Continued From Page 110)

"that you didn't really love him? But I could see how hurt you were—"

"Of course I was hurt, Jeff. Who wouldn't be? But it was mostly to my pride. And you can't ever guess how relieved I was, even in the middle of that, to have such a good out from my promise to marry him!"

For an instant longer Jeff stared down into her eyes, hungrily, still half unbelieving. Then, at what he saw there, he gathered her suddenly into his arms.

"Sure, Nora darlin'," he said. "And the name fits you."

Footsteps sounded on the cinder path nearby, a path over which the cook, who abhorred mud, had labored patiently in his spare time that day. Hank Measen came into sight, straining his eyes for sight of the big boss, waving a telegram in one hand.

He halted suddenly, staring, and reached up to finger his chin thoughtfully with the telegram still fluttering against his neck. Then a slow grin creased his face and he turned away, aware that, gravel path or no, they had not heard him.

"Reckon I can answer this here telegram just as well as he can, when it comes to that," Hank muttered. "And tell Hamby that all's well at end of steel. As for tellin' him all the news of what's been going on here, like how his trouble-shooter's takin' on more'n he ever had before—why, I reckon he'll just have to find some things out for himself, like Jeff's done. It ain't my business to tell all I know."

THE END

Powdersmoke Peace

(Continued From Page 108)

He sat down, his head in his hands. She set the rifle in the corner and knelt beside him. He sat there for some time and fought his inner battle. Finally he looked at her.

He said, "I'll never kill—"

"Hush," she said.

He smiled, then. And it was the smile of a youth—a kid of twenty-four—not that of a forty-year-old man.

THE END

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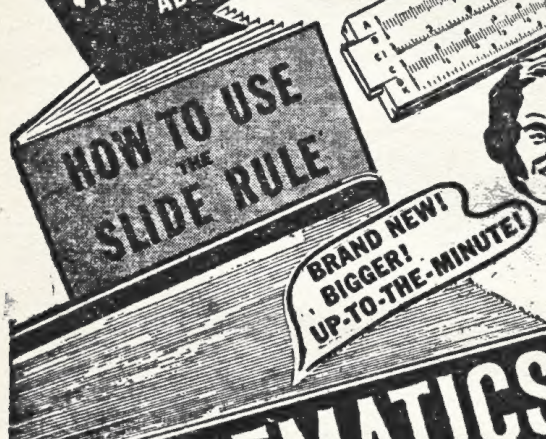

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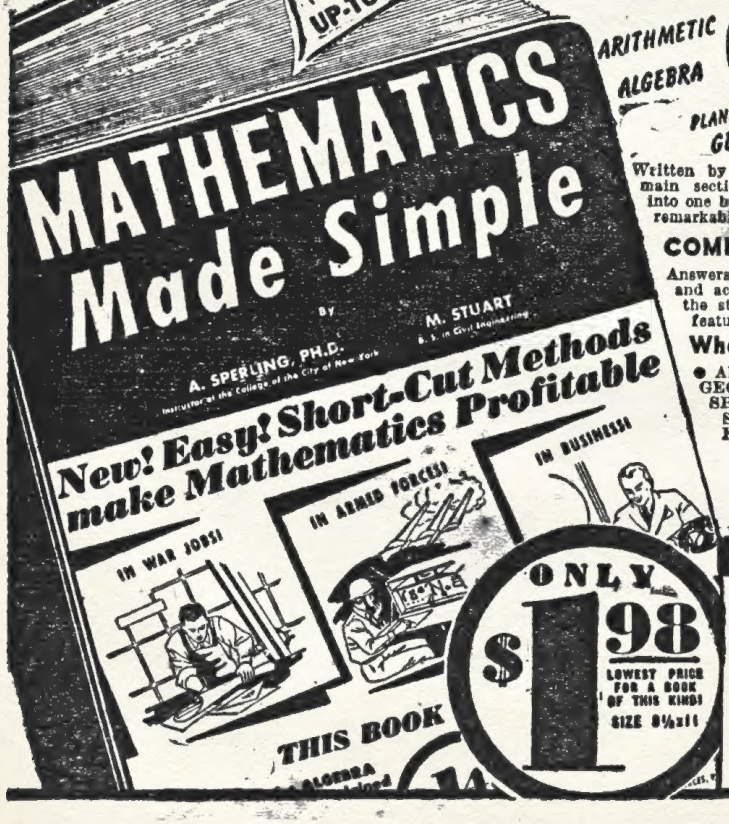

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